

Full Summary: Harry Potter's life is forever changed when Professor McGonagall tells him he is a wizard. Because Harry was never told Dark Wizards come from Slytherin, he allows himself to be sorted in to that house. Will this merely serve to strengthen his resolve as a hero, or will he end up more evil than even Lord Voldemort?

Harry Potter and the Darkest Vindications

By Xarkun

Part I: The Dark Beginnings

Chapter 1: Professor McGonagall

It was storming outside, and the young boy lying upon the floor of the small, run-down house listened to the waves of the sea beat against the rock outside. Harry Potter was cold. Covered only in a dirty old sheet, he shivered where he was lying. He was positioned upon the floor in front of the couch his enormously fat cousin, Dudley, occupied. Dudley was asleep, and covered in two thick blankets. Harry might've fallen asleep hours ago if not for Dudley's incessant snoring and the hardness of the ground on which he was forced to use instead of a proper bed.

Harry Potter was a peculiar boy. He'd never known his parents because they'd died when he was barely a year old. That'd been about ten years ago in a car crash. He was quite skinny and quite shabby in appearance. His untidy jet black hair was just becoming long enough to fall over the broken broken glasses he wore. They were held together with tape in between their completely circular lenses. Upon his forehead, beneath the veil of hair, was a most curiously shaped scar. It looked quite like a lightning bolt. Harry'd been told that he got it in the car crash that killed his parents.

Today was Harry's birthday, but, like all his previous birthdays, it was not an event to be celebrated. Harry lived with his aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley. They were his legal guardians in his parent's absence.

Despite the fact that they were his de facto parents, they'd never treated Harry as their own son. They'd treated him as a nuisance in their lives, forcing him to sleep in a cupboard under the staircase of their home. They constantly humiliated him, and assigned him

countless amounts of chores that Aunt Petunia found too disgusting and degrading to do herself-like scrubbing the grout in between the tiles, or cleaning up the septic when it backed up.

This was the only life Harry had ever known. It was a sad life, and a humiliating life. He had no friends at school because Dudley was constantly telling other children about how abnormal his cousin was. Sometimes, it made Harry angry, and when Harry was angry, strange things tended to happen-inexplicable things that he could not have been held accountable for. Yet, somehow, he was always blamed for them.

The letters were an example of such abnormalities. About a week ago, he had received a letter in the mail, but he'd never been able to open it. Uncle Vernon had promptly snatched it away, tossed it in the fire, and locked Harry in his cupboard for a day without any food. Then, three letters, identical to the first, had arrived on a Sunday morning tied to the leg of an owl. Uncle Vernon had flushed crimson at the sight of the owl and the letter and locked Harry up again.

Then, about a day ago, on another Sunday, letters had flooded in to the Dursley's neat and tidy home through every conceivable entrance, seemingly by magic. After experiencing that episode, the Dursleys made plans to escape the "persecution", plans that any psychiatrist would have deemed the product of schizophrenia. Uncle Vernon had brought them to this cottage on an island in the middle of the sea, muttering about how they 'wouldn't be found here'.

Harry didn't understand it, and it annoyed him. The letters were his, but his aunt and uncle were determined to keep them from him. He didn't know why. He supposed it was just another way for them to assert their superiority over him, but he knew there had to be more to it than that. The nature of the letters arrival was extraordinary. It was almost as if they had been produced by magic. Harry thought that the Dursleys must know something about the letters that he did not know-something that frightened them enough to flee from the comfort of their home and come here, to this cold, run-down, dirty cottage on a rock in the sea.

The floor Harry was laying upon was coated in about an inch of dirt. Harry's eyes had become accustomed to the dark many hours ago. He could see quite clearly as he drew a birthday cake in the dirt, and topped it off with eleven candles.

"Happy birthday, Harry," he said to himself.

In that instant, a clap of thunder sounded. It was abnormally loud and made Harry jump. Another explosion of thunder followed immediately after. Harry thought this odd, because he'd never heard thunder boom twice in a row. Then the rush of cold air caught his attention. He looked up toward the door of the cottage to see a cloaked woman enter; carrying what appeared to be a flashlight. She wore an odd hat, which reminded him of a witch's cap he'd once seen a woman wearing on Halloween. Harry was alarmed to see that the woman in the threshold of the cottage had somehow managed to blow the door off its hinges. It was lying on the floor before her feet.

Harry bolted up as Dudley awoke from his deep slumber. The woman sidestepped further in to the cottage and aimed her flashlight at the door. On its own accord, it rose up, and placed itself back in the threshold. There was a click as the hinges twisted themselves back in to place.

By this time, Dudley was nearly done rubbing the sleep from his eyes with his pudgy hands. When he was finished, he took one look at the woman and shrieked in terror.

Harry heard commotion from the bedroom upstairs as Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon both jumped out of bed. They were downstairs in the next moment. Uncle Vernon was carrying what appeared to be an old shotgun. He gasped when he saw the woman, and even in the darkness Harry could see his cheeks flush with anger.

He cocked the gun and aimed it right at the woman's chest.

"Now, see here!" cried Uncle Vernon. "I'll not have this! Don't think I don't know who you are! I demand you leave at once, madam! You are breaking and entering. I shall phone the police!"

"Please, Mr. Dursley, save your cowardly threats for someone who will be intimidated by them," replied the woman tartly. She aimed her flashlight at the fireplace next to Harry and gave it a flick. A roaring fire sprang to life, providing more light to the room in the cottage than the flashlight did, so the woman turned it off with another flick.

When its light was extinguished, she disposed of it somewhere in the pockets of her robes.

"Oi!" Uncle Vernon roared. "You've no business here! I demand-"

"Mr. Dursley, Professor Dumbledore would like me to remind you and your wife that you were instructed to treat Harry Potter as your own child. I've seen with my own eyes that you have failed to do so. Lower that primitive weapon or I shall take it from you."

Uncle Vernon blanched and lowered the gun reluctantly. Aunt Petunia looked as though she was about to faint.

"That bloody cat!" Uncle Vernon cried. There was no context to his outburst and it made him sound quite insane.

"Indeed," said the woman. Harry could make no sense of her reply either, though it appeared both she and Uncle Vernon understood one another.

She then turned her attention to Harry. He unconsciously back stepped.

Without warning, she started toward Harry. Dudley squealed in horror, leapt over the back of the couch he'd been sleeping on, and ran to join his parents at the foot of the stairs. Aunt Petunia wrapped her stick-like arms about her bulbous son, attempting to hug him close.

Harry turned his attention back to the woman. She smiled warmly as she came into the light of the fire. He could see her clearly for the first time. She was dressed in all black robes, and she wore what was clearly a witch's hat. Her face was lined with the wrinkles of old age, and, while kindly, it was also stern. Under her hat, her black and gray hair was pulled back in to a tight bun. She smiled at Harry and took a seat on the couch Dudley had just vacated.

From her robes, she produced an envelope and extended it toward Harry.

Reluctantly, Harry grabbed the envelope from the strange woman and looked at the writing upon it.

To Mr. Harry James Potter

Number 4, Privet Drive

Little Whinging, Surrey

"Go ahead, Mr. Potter, open it," said the woman.

Uncle Vernon made a kind of choking noise in his throat. The woman turned and fixed him with a look. He scowled as his face turned a sickly puce color.

Harry examined the seal on the envelope. It was exactly the same as the seal on first letter he'd been sent-the one Uncle Vernon had tossed in the fire. With a rush of giddy anticipation, Harry broke the seal and opened the envelope. Finally, he'd discover what it is all these letters were about.

Written in an elegant script was a message on a piece of parchment.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on the 1st of September.

Sincerely,

Minerva M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Confused, Harry looked at the list of necessary supplies.

It read:

Uniform

First year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain workrobes (black)

2. One plain pointed hat (black) for daywear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragonhide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Standard Books

All first year students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade One) by Miranda Goshawk
A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot
Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling
A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration by Emeric Switch
One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore
Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger
Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander
The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

Other Equipment

- 1 wand
- 1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)
- 1 set glass or crystal phials
- 1 telescope
- 1 set brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS.

Harry lowered the letter and looked toward the woman who was smiling at him.

"I-I don't understand, ma'am," said Harry.

Her smile vanished and she nodded. "I suppose you wouldn't," she said. "Obviously, your aunt and uncle have managed to keep these letters from you, so Professor Dumbledore sent me to deliver this personally. You are indeed a wizard, Mr. Potter, as you've no doubt been wondering. You have been accepted to Hogwarts. I've come to inform you of this, as is customary to all Muggle-born students,

though you're not Muggle born. You've merely been raised by Muggles. My name is Professor McGonagall, deputy headmistress of Hogwarts School."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said Harry. "But what is Hogwarts School? I've never heard of it."

Professor McGonagall's eyebrows constricted. Her lips tightened to form a very narrow line. She turned to look at the Dursleys.

"You mean to say you've not told this boy of his heritage?"

"Now, see here, woman!" snapped Uncle Vernon, starting forward.

McGonagall stood, and Uncle Vernon halted, halfway to her. He straightened up and scowled indignantly.

"We swore to protect the boy when this Dumbledore left him upon our doorstep! Well, I'll not have any of this magic mumbo jumbo! It's abnormal, I say! He won't be going to this school of yours, no sir!"

"Are you daft, Mr. Dursley? Not allow the son of Lily and James Potter to attend Hogwarts? And you haven't even told him about what he is? This is quite insulting. I can hardly believe it! After what happened to Lily and James I would've thought-

"That is quite enough!" huffed Aunt Petunia. She tilted her chin upward, upturning her long, horse-like face irascibly. "My sister stuck her nose in to one too many things that she should've stayed away from. I knew it'd be the end of her someday. Oh, but my parents were so proud to have a witch in the family. I was the only one who saw her for what she was: a freak! She went and got herself blown up. Well, I'll not have-

"Blown up?" Harry croed. "You said my parents died in a car crash!"

"A car crash?" Professor McGonagall said incredulously. "A car crash? A mere Muggle-grade lapse of control? You say that that killed Lily and James Potter? That's completely ridiculous. I can hardly believe the lies you've told this poor boy. When I first began watching you on my own, I knew.... You truly are the most wretched Muggles imaginable. The way you've treated this boy is despicable. I have half a mind to break the law and hex all three of you! Look at

what you've done to your own son! Spoiled him rotten! Mal nutrition! He is quite overweight. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

"Excuse me," Harry interjected.

Professor McGonagall turned to face him with a considerably friendlier look, though her eyes still burned with her intense anger at the Dursleys. Harry thought her a bit imposing.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" she asked.

"Well, you called them Muggles. Er... what are Muggles?"

"Oh, yes, of course you wouldn't know. Muggles are a term that we use for people that can not use magic."

"But, you must be mistaken, ma'am. I can't use magic. I'm just...."

"No, you can most certainly use magic, Mr. Potter. We do not make mistakes. You are a wizard."

"But I can't be a wizard. I'm... just Harry."

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, have you ever caused things to happen? Things you could not explain yourself when you were, perhaps, angry, sad, or scared?"

"Well...." Harry trailed off, thinking. Mysterious things had happened before when he was angry or humiliated. Once Aunt Petunia had insisted on cutting his untamable hair. She'd cut all of it to a centimeter, but left his bangs in order to hide the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. Harry had been so humiliated and so afraid of going to school the next day. He'd cried himself to sleep at the thought of the ridicule he'd face because of how he'd looked. Other children had made fun of him before because of the clothes he wore, and those snide remarks always made him angry and sad. He remembered being so afraid of what they'd say when they saw his hair. Miraculously, the next morning it'd all grown back. He'd earned a week confined to his cupboard as punishment.

"Yes," said Harry. "Strange things have happened before."

"Those are signs of magic, Mr. Potter. You see, a witch or wizard often displays signs of magic starting at a young age, though they have no control over such things. At the age of eleven, a wizard is ready to be properly schooled in magic. Since you are now eleven, you are invited to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Should you choose to accept?"

"I think we've made it very clear he will not be going!" Uncle Vernon interrupted.

"Under normal circumstances, Mr. Dursley, you would be able to deny permission to Mr. Potter here," said McGonagall, her voice straining to contain some resemblance to a tone of informative politeness. "However, should Mr. Potter choose to accept, I will see to it that it is known you gave him your permission. If you deny such things or fail to sign the necessary documents and the like, I shall personally see to it that you will never be able to sign anything again. In words you can probably more easily comprehend, you have no choice in this matter. Are we clear in this matter, Mr. Dursley?"

Uncle Vernon grumbled something unintelligible.

"Are we clear on this matter, Mr. Dursley?" Professor McGonagall repeated.

"Yes," muttered Uncle Vernon, working to control his wild irritation.

"Very well. Mr. Potter, do you wish to attend Hogwarts School? Term begins on September the 1st and commences in early June. You will board there for the entire school year, but you may return home on holidays such as Christmas."

Harry considered this for a moment. An entire school year at Hogwarts, away from the Dursleys, sounded like a tempting proposition to him. However, he wasn't quite sure he believed Professor McGonagall. It wasn't every day that one discovered they were a wizard.

"Professor, how does magic work?" he asked.

"Ah," said McGonagall knowingly. "Yes. I assumed you might ask for a bit of proof. Very well. Remember Harry, it is strictly illegal to use magic in the presence of Muggles. The Ministry of Magic grants very

rare exceptions. In this sort of circumstance, for example, it is acceptable. I am using it as proof to you and your Muggle guardians. Observe."

Professor McGonagall produced what looked like a stick from a pocket in her robes. Harry realized that it was what he'd originally thought was a flashlight. She aimed the stick at Dudley's pillow, which sat on the opposite side of the couch upon which she was sitting, and gave it a causal flick.

The pillow burst in to flames.

Harry jumped at the sight. Aunt Petunia let out a little squeak. Uncle Vernon sounded as though he were choking on a piece of rubber and Dudley hid his face in his mother's nightgown. Professor McGonagall closed her eyes for a moment, looking as though she was desperately trying to remain patient with the Dursleys, and then flicked the piece of wood again.

The flames vanished, and the pillow appeared unharmed.

"Wow," said Harry before he could help himself.

"I trust that is proof enough for you, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry.

"Very good. Do you choose to accept your invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

Harry took one look at the Dursleys and made his decision.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I accept."

"Wonderful, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "Well, we best be off then."

"Now?" asked Harry with surprise.

"Oh, yes. It is close to dawn. We shall go to get the necessary supplies. I'll be able to rest easier knowing you already have them. Then, all these Muggles will have to do is get you to where you need

to go. Even with their obvious lack of intelligence, I trust they can do that."

Uncle Vernon muttered something angrily under his breath, but Professor McGonagall ignored him.

"Well, come now, Harry."

"But how are we going to get off the island?"

"I'll be taking you to Diagon Alley through the use of Side-Along Apparition."

"Side-Along what?"

"Come, Mr. Potter. It is more magic. I'll show you."

Professor McGonagall stood and started off toward the door. Harry stumbled to follow and gave the Dursleys a parting look. Aunt Petunia deliberately looked away and Uncle Vernon scowled. Harry smiled as he exited the cottage.

Chapter 2: Diagon Alley

Harry realized immediately he was not fond of Side-Along Apparition. After complying with Professor McGonagall's request to take her arm once they were outside of the cottage, Harry felt as though he'd just been violently shoved in to a very narrow tube and was slowly being squeezed through. The tube, whether real or not, seemed to constrict more with each passing moment, and it crushed Harry's ribs together, making it impossible to breathe. The pressure converged in his head, increasing until he thought his eyes might burst from their sockets. Just when he was sure all of his bones were going to give way and snap, and his body was going to crushed into a tiny, narrow box, the sensation vanished.

He was suddenly standing in an alleyway with Professor McGonagall. It wasn't raining like it'd been at the cottage. And the sun was already lighting the street before them.

"Wow," said Harry. "Is Apparition like teleportation?"

"In a sense, yes," Professor McGonagall replied. "Sorry about the sensation, Mr. Potter. Side-Along Apparition is a curious thing, and it's an uncomfortable feeling. The more you do it, the easier it will become. I would've brought you by another means, but you're not ready to fly so I saw no other option."

"It's all right, ma'am," said Harry.

If he hadn't been completely convinced that Professor McGonagall could really use magic before, he was now.

"Come along, then Mr. Potter," she said.

Harry followed her out of the alleyway and onto the sidewalk of a street in London. She started down the sidewalk and Harry tagged along behind her.

"Where are we going, ma'am?" Harry asked.

"Diagon Alley. To get there, however, we must first go to the Leaky Cauldron. I took us outside so that you would be able to find it for yourself in the future. Take note of your surroundings Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced at the street sign and committed the name to memory. He looked at all the buildings lining the streets, but none were very remarkable. He was worried he might not be able to remember this place, so he kept repeating the name of the street in his head.

Professor McGonagall stopped without warning, and Harry nearly ran into her. She gestured toward the building before them. It looked like a shabby little pub. A sign above the door read The Leaky Cauldron in crooked, golden letters. Harry glanced around at all the people walking by. None of them seemed to notice the little pub. No one paid it any attention. Some of the people looked quizzically at Professor McGonagall standing there and tried to follow her gaze, but their eyes seemed to stare right through the Leaky Cauldron.

"Can't they see it?" Harry asked.

"The Muggles? No, they can't," said McGonagall. "It is bewitched so that only those with magic are able to see it."

"Oh," said Harry. "Cool. I suppose that's useful."

"Yes, quite useful. How else do you think we've managed to remain hidden from Muggles? Well, come along, Mr. Potter."

McGonagall approached the door to the shabby little pub and pulled it open, motioning for Harry to enter. Before doing so, Harry took another look at all the 'Muggles'. It seemed to him that everyone was now deliberately looking away from the Leaky Cauldron, toward anything else in sight. He guessed that that must be part of the bewitchment on the place, but couldn't understand how such a thing might work.

Harry entered the little pub.

It was a lot bigger than he expected. Even though it was early morning, the place was filled with all manner of people. Most of them were cloaked in odd robes Harry had never seen on anybody else before. Some gossiped amongst themselves, others were engrossed in what looked like a newspaper called the Daily Prophet. Harry followed Professor McGonagall toward the bar and did a double take when he thought he saw one of the pictures on the Daily Prophet move.

It did.

Harry's jaw dropped. The person reading the paper, a scraggly looking old wizard with a mostly bald head peered over the top of the paper at Harry. The man's eyes first examined Harry's untidy hair, and then traveled down a bit. The man dropped his paper. His jaw then dropped open. Harry closed his mouth and back stepped in surprise when the old man pointed at his forehead.

"Merlin's beard, your hair nearly hides it, but I can see it, I can! You're Harry Potter!"

Harry was shocked that a complete stranger knew his name. Professor McGonagall turned around to look at Harry and sighed as everyone in the pub stood up to get a better look. She sighed exasperatedly once more as whispers traveled about the place.

Harry couldn't make sense of it.

McGonagall motioned for him to follow her. As he did, several people approached him to shake his hand.

They said things like: "It's an honor to finally meet you at last," "Merlin's beard! I can't believe it! The Boy Who Lived!", or "It's a pleasure, Mr. Potter."

Harry didn't understand any of this. These people were treating him as though he was famous.

He and Professor McGonagall finally reached the bar. A robed man in a purple turban turned to greet them.

"H-Hello, M-M-Minerva," he stuttered. "A-Ah! And I-look at th-this! H-Harry Potter. It's a p-pleasure to m-meet you at l-last."

"Erm... good morning," said Harry, shaking the man's hand.

"This is Professor Quirrel, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall informed him. "He will be your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts."

"L-Looking f-forward to s-s-seeing you in my c-class, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrel said.

"Thank you, sir," said Harry.

"H-Have a nice d-day."

"You too."

"Come along now, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall instructed.

Harry followed her. She led him to a door near the back of the Leaky Cauldron. He shook a few more people's hands on the way there. Professor McGonagall opened the door with a flick of the little wooden stick she carried with her. She ushered Harry through the threshold into what looked like a storage area. Shelves lined every wall except the back which was made up entirely of old, red bricks.

As Professor McGonagall shut the door behind herself, Harry turned to face her.

"Er... Professor, where are we?"

"You will see in a moment, Mr. Potter," the Professor assured him.

She strode toward the bare wall, the stick in her hand. Harry noticed for the first time that the Professor carried herself in a very dignified way, with her head held high, and an impeccably straight posture.

Professor McGonagall began to touch the tip of the stick, seemingly at random, to a number of bricks. Harry watched with curiosity.

"Professor," he addressed. "What is that thing?"

"This, Mr. Potter, is a wand. You shall purchase one today, but I must warn you that you are not allowed to use magic outside of Hogwarts until you reach seventeen years of age."

"Right," said Harry, accepting this, like all the other strange things he'd seen today, without question. By now he was sort of numb to the surprise of it all.

Professor McGonagall rapped her wand twice on one last brick, and then shoved it in the pockets of her robes. She took a step back, and Harry watched as the bricks in the wall began to pull away from

each other, and recede toward the shelved walls in either direction. They were gone quickly, and a new alleyway was revealed in their absence. The sight of it made Harry's jaw drop. It was the second thing to elicit that kind of reaction in him today. He was sure it would happen again because of what he saw within the alley.

It was a narrow, quirky place, filled to the brim with all manner of strange and wondrous people dressed in cloaks and odd hats going about their business. A few of them carried an assortment of strange and abnormal items with them like cauldrons and cages occupied by owls. There were shops lining the streets. Harry stared at them as Professor McGonagall led him further in to the alley.

He took a look behind him to see that the brick wall was gone.

He shook his head in disbelief and trailed behind the Professor as she walked. He glanced at the sign which proclaimed this place to be Diagon Alley.

Harry was absolutely astounded to see the shops. They claimed to sell things like potions, broomsticks for flying, robes, magical herbs, owls, dangerous and exotic sounding sweets, and one, called Olivanders, even claimed to sell the best wands.

McGonagall led him past all the shops, deeper in to the alley. He was thankful that no one seemed to pay him any mind or see his scar. They were all too busy to notice him. Some of them greeted Professor McGonagall, but Harry made sure to stay behind her in case they saw his scar and it made them want to shake his hand. Harry got the impression that the people who stopped to speak with McGonagall were old students.

Harry became more and more amazed with each shop they passed.

Finally, he could not keep his questions in check.

"Professor, can brooms really fly?"

"Of course they can, Mr. Potter," she told him. "But first years usually never have any need for them. The school provides brooms for flying lessons. After the year is out, you should be a novice flier."

"Er... Professor, you said we were going to buy my supplies."

"Yes, indeed we are, Mr. Potter."

"But I haven't got any money."

"I think you might be surprised to find that you do. You may not have any money in the Muggle world, but you have quite a large fortune here. The Potters were very wealthy. They left their fortune to you. You are now old enough to lay claim to it. We are going to Gringotts, the Wizard Bank in order for you with to withdraw some money for shopping today. I also need to make a small... withdrawal."

"Oh," said Harry. "Okay."

Harry wondered why Professor McGonagall paused when she said 'withdrawal'.

After a time, they reached a very tall building that reminded Harry of the pictures of structures he'd seen of the capitol buildings of the United States of America in Washington D.C. It was made entirely out of white stone, and the roof was supported by pillars. The architecture reminded Harry of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but there was something distinctly peculiar about it-something magical. Professor McGonagall led Harry to the door and they both entered the building. Harry found himself standing in the very large lobby of a very crowded bank. The roof of the lobby was supported by pillars as well, and lit by many chandeliers holding brightly glowing candles. People strode to and fro, going from desk to desk.

Odd looking tellers in green robes sat behind each desk. A few of them were witches and wizards, but most were very short, strange looking creatures that had pointed ears and long noses. Harry thought they were rather creepy as he saw a few of them pass him, in line with the throngs of people zigzagging through the lobby. None of them were much taller than his knees. A few of them almost reached the height of his waist.

Professor McGonagall led him through the crowd of witches, wizards, and the strange, short creatures, to one of the desks. A sign above it proclaimed it to be an area that served requests for withdrawals. Another one of the odd creatures sat behind the desk. He wore tiny spectacles, but was staring over them at the wizard he was currently serving. He looked rather cross to Harry, as though he wasn't fond

of his job and would like nothing more than to hit the wizard over the head with a heavy, blunt object.

"Professor," Harry whispered, not taking his eyes off the creature. "What are those?"

"Those are goblins, Mr. Potter. They manage Gringotts. They are quite a proud race; very stubborn, and they take offense easily. Please, refrain from staring at him."

"Sorry," said Harry. He looked down at his shoes.

After a short time, Professor McGonagall stepped forward. Harry followed her and looked up at the goblin, trying not to focus on him for too long.

"Good morning, Professor," said the goblin politely, though his voice carried what Harry thought might be a hint of contempt or sarcasm. Harry found it odd that the creature's voice was quite deep and gravelly. He'd expected it to be higher pitched.

"Good morning," said McGonagall rather curtly. "We are here to make a withdrawal from the account of Mr. Harry James Potter."

The goblin's pointy ears perked up at the sound of the name. He turned his beady little eyes to Harry.

"I see," he said. "And does Mr. Harry James Potter have his key?"

"I have it," said Professor McGonagall. "I also have a letter from Professor Dumbledore."

Harry watched as Professor McGonagall pulled an ornate, silver key from the pocket of her robes, as well as a tiny envelope. She handed both to the goblin. He immediately opened the letter. Harry watched his eyes rake over the writing upon it.

"Very well," he said. The goblin motioned for someone behind him.

"Griphook!" he called.

Another goblin, who looked to Harry to be quite ill tempered, approached the one behind the desk. They exchanged a few words that Harry could not understand and, for that matter, could barely hear since they were talking so quietly. Griphook nodded and turned his attention to Harry and Professor McGonagall.

"Follow me, please," he said in a deep, gravelly rasp.

Professor McGonagall and Harry followed Griphook further into the back of the lobby where it was considerably darker and, in a way, foreboding. They went through a door that led in to what seemed to be a massive underground cave.

Griphook explained that the vaults of Gringotts were deep underground when Harry asked, and the only way to reach them was by rail cart. Harry didn't like the looks of the tiny little box on wheels which stood on the rail. He thought it a poor excuse for a rail cart, but stepped in to it nonetheless. He sat next to Professor McGonagall and clutched the side of the car tightly as it sped off into the caves. The glowing lantern that Griphook had taken from the lobby was their only source of light.

The cart made miraculous, hairpin turns on a dime. Harry thought some of them should be impossible. It zoomed up inclines and rushed down slopes even faster. Harry felt like he was on a rollercoaster. His stomach lurched whenever they went downhill. Occasionally they passed by other tracks leading off in different directions. Harry thought the natural system of underground Gringotts vaults must be massive. From the distance they'd already traveled, he wondered if it covered the same area as London itself.

Harry thought he was going to be sick when they came down a slope that looked dangerously steep. To his relief, the car began to slow before it finally came to a halt before the drop at a small hollow in the rocky wall. Harry could see a door on the far end of the hollow.

Griphook snatched the lantern off the hanger he'd slung it on and climbed out on to the ledge of the hollow. Harry and Professor McGonagall followed suit, and the goblin led them to the massive door. It looked quite plain on the outside, from what Harry could see.

"Vault 713," the goblin announced. He ran his long fingernail down the length of the door, beginning as high as he could reach. The sound of booming clicks assaulted them. Harry could feel them resonate in his chest. After a moment, the door pulled open, revealing a rather small cavern. Professor McGonagall stepped in, and Harry followed her.

Sitting on an entirely unremarkable pedestal was a tiny bundle formed of what looked like a bit of a shredded burlap sack. It was tied closed with a length of twine. The bundle was bathed in a shaft of light that seemed to have no source. Professor McGonagall took out her wand and waved it about the pedestal a few times, all the while muttering things Harry couldn't understand.

Nothing seemed to happen, but Professor McGonagall stowed her wand and grabbed the bundle off the pedestal. She paused for a moment, weighing it in her hands. Then she put it in the pockets of her robes along with her wand.

"Excuse me, Professor, but what was that?" Harry asked.

"Something very secret, Mr. Potter," said the Professor. She looked at him over her spectacles. "You will refrain from telling anyone about this."

"Sure, ma'am," said Harry. "I won't tell anyone."

"Very good. Come along now. We'll be going to your vault."

Harry followed Professor McGonagall reluctantly back to the cart. He wasn't looking forward to another ride. Griphook sealed the door to Vault 713 and they were off again. The ride this time was much shorter. Harry thought it was easier on stomach the second time. He also felt glad that he could be in on a secret with Professor McGonagall. It made him feel important; a bit like a co-conspirator. He'd certainly never felt important before today.

The cart came to a stop at a hollow in the rock not unlike the entrance of Vault 713.

"This is your vault, Harry," said Professor McGonagall. "Griphook will open the door for you." She reached in to her robes and gave him an empty coin sack. "Here. Fill this all the way up with Galleons.

Those will be the largest gold coins. Try not to dawdle, Mr. Potter. Time is of the essence. We can't spend all day in Diagon Alley."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry.

He followed the short, rather pudgy little Goblin to the door of his vault. Griphook produced a key, the one McGonagall had given the goblin teller, and inserted it in the very low keyhole inset in the vault door. Griphook turned it with his stubby fingers, and Harry heard the sound of deep, resonating clicks again. His vault door opened slowly, and when it did, it revealed a massive cavern overflowing with piles and piles of gold coins.

Harry's jaw dropped again. He'd never seen so many coins or so much gold in one place. He couldn't believe his parents had been this rich. Harry ran in to the vault, approached the nearest pile of coins, and filled the sack Professor McGonagall had given him full of the largest gold coins. When he was finished, he tightened the string of the sack, took one last look at the astounding contents of his vault, and returned to the cart.

They left Gringotts quickly and Professor McGonagall took Harry to many stores in Diagon Alley, instructing him to buy whichever supplies the acceptance letter to Hogwarts deemed necessary. In between stores, she lectured him on the ways in which wizard currency worked. Harry had been confused when he'd been handed back change in silver and bronze coins.

He bought all manner of things. Three nice sets of black robes from a place called Madam Malkin's, as well as a hat. After that, Professor McGonagall assisted him in finding all the necessary textbooks in a store called Flourish and Blotts. It was then that Professor McGonagall told him he best bring his Transfiguration book to class every day without fail, because she did not tolerate unpreparedness. She also advised him to read a few chapters before term began in each of his books so that he would be ahead, though she warned him not to try any spells. That was for Hogwarts.

After Flourish and Blotts Harry bought a cauldron, a set of brass scales from a shop that smelled quite horrible, and a few potion ingredients. Professor McGonagall then took him to the last place they had to shop, a store called Ollivander's. Apparently, Mr. Ollivander was the best wand maker around.

Professor McGonagall told Harry to go on in while she left to go pick something up. She assured him she would not take long, but she warned him that it might take him a while to find a proper wand.

Harry entered Ollivander's shop. The reception area was rather small. Behind the counter was what appeared to be a small warehouse full of wands in boxes on many shelves. Harry, shocked at the at the staggering number of wands, approached the desk.

An elderly man with a shock of gray hair suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"Good morning, young man," he said, approaching Harry from behind the desk. "Wand shopping today?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Excellent, excellent...." The man, who Harry assumed was Mr. Ollivander trailed off when he caught sight of Harry's scar. "Merlin's beard. You are Harry Potter. I wondered when you'd come shopping for a wand. Very good to meet you at last."

"Thank you, sir. Er... nice to meet you, too."

"Yes, well, let's begin! Hold out your wand arm, please."

"My... wand arm?"

"It's usually the one you write with, at least... Well, more often times than not."

Harry extended his right arm.

Mr. Ollivander twirled his wand, and a tape measure appeared out of thin air. It wrapped itself around Harry's arm. Mr. Ollivander noted measurements that Harry could not make sense of.

After a short time, the measuring was finished and Mr. Ollivander magicked the tape measure away.

"All right," he said. "I believe I've got just the thing."

Harry watched as Mr. Ollivander rushed off to grab a wand from a box upon one of the shelves. He returned and handed it to Harry.

"Er..." said Harry.

"Well... give it a wave."

Harry gave the wand a wave. A pile of papers on Mr. Ollivander's desk caught fire. The wandmaker shook his head and extinguished the flame.

"No, no, no," he muttered, seemingly to himself. "That won't do." He snatched the wand from Harry. "Perhaps ebony and dragon heartstring...."

Mr. Ollivander returned the wand he'd had Harry test to the shelf and brought him another one. When Harry waved it, a glass handle holder exploded and its contents spilled to the floor. Harry had no idea what they were. They appeared to be black marbles. Mr. Ollivander snatched the wand away and replaced it with another one. This process was repeated several times, and each time, it seemed Harry destroyed something bigger and more valuable. He was worried Mr. Ollivander might not be too happy about that, but the man didn't seem to care. From the way he muttered to himself, it seemed as though he found it an engrossing challenge to locate the proper wand for Harry. Harry found it tedious and alarming.

Finally, after what must have been an hour, Mr. Ollivander pulled a dark, long wand from the shelf and examined it.

"I wonder..." he said.

Harry grabbed the wand as Mr. Ollivander handed it to him.

The instant he did, he felt a tingling sensation in his arm which nearly caused him to drop the wand in surprise. Harry jumped a little when a shower of red sparks shot from the tip of the wand.

"Curious," said Mr. Ollivander. "Most curious."

"Sorry, sir, what's curious?"

"You see, Mr. Potter, the wand chooses the wizard. Not the other way around. No one, not even I, knows why this is so. You see, Mr. Potter, the Phoenix whose tail feather resides in this wand gave another feather, but only one. It is curious that you should be destined for this wand when its brother gave you that scar."

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He wasn't sure what Mr. Ollivander was talking about, so he didn't say anything further. Harry purchased the wand and bade Mr. Ollivander goodbye. He was glad to be leaving. What the old wand maker had said about his wand disturbed him.

When he exited the shop, he found Professor McGonagall waiting for him, clutching a cage which held a snowy, white owl.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. I have taken the liberty of purchasing you an owl. Something you might find useful. In the wizarding world, owls are used to carry letters. Students, are of course, welcome to use the school's owls to send what they need to send, but I thought you might find it convenient to have one of your own."

"Wow," said Harry. "Thanks, Professor."

"I am told her name is Hedwig."

XxX

Professor McGonagall took Harry back to the Leaky Cauldron when they had finished buying the supplies he needed. The two of them had lunch together. It was the biggest meal Harry had seen in a long time.

As they ate, Harry decided to ask Professor McGonagall a few questions he'd been pondering.

"Excuse me, Professor," Harry said.

"Yes, Mr. Potter? What is it?"

"I was just wondering.... Professor, what really did happen to my parents? Why did everyone shake my hand when we first came in?"

Professor McGonagall studied him a moment over her spectacles. She wore a look of complete detachment. Harry thought he saw something in her eyes, though. He didn't quite know what.

"What you must understand, Harry," Professor McGonagall began, addressing him by his first name for the first time, "is that there are good witches and wizards, and bad witches and wizards. I'm sure it's like that in the Muggle world as well.... I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, Harry, but your parents were murdered by the darkest wizard ever to walk the earth. He killed them on Halloween night ten years ago."

Harry nodded, having suspected as much. He felt a strange, hollow emptiness in the pit of his stomach.

"What was the wizard's name?" Harry asked.

"We do not speak it. He is known to everyone as He Who Must Not Be Named, or occasionally You Know Who. His followers call him the Dark Lord."

"Does he have a name?"

"Yes, he has a name."

"Well, what is it?"

"I will not say his name aloud."

"Could you write it down?"

"No."

"Please tell me Professor," Harry said. "I want to know."

Professor McGonagall examined his face for a moment and then swallowed. "His name was... Lord... Lord Voldemort, Mr. Potter." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"What happened to him?" Harry asked. "To Voldemort?"

"Do not speak his name!"

"Sorry.... What happened to You Know Who, then, Professor?"

"That, Mr. Potter, is why everyone in our world knows your name. He Who Must Not Be Named attempted to kill you along with your parents. No one knows exactly why, but some people are under the impression that You Know Who believed you were a threat to him. That scar upon your forehead, Mr. Potter, is a mark of magic. Very, very dark, illegal magic used to murder people. You are the only person known to have survived the Killing Curse. It is said that You Know Who lost his power that night. He has not been seen since."

"Is he dead, Professor?"

"No one is sure, Mr. Potter. Professor Dumbledore believes he is out there somewhere, but very weak. If he is still alive, I'm sure he is not much of a threat any longer. I would not worry about it, Mr. Potter."

"All right, ma'am," said Harry. Goosebumps ran all up and down his arms from the story about Lord Voldemort. He was shocked to hear that he was famous for surviving a murder attempt on him when he was only a baby. He decided he didn't want to talk about it anymore. Harry had other questions anyway.

"Professor, what is Hogwarts like?"

"Hogwarts is a great castle that was built thousands of years ago by four great wizards of that age. They were called Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. Students in Hogwarts are divided up into houses named after the four founders. Your house is like your family there. Each house is given points for good behavior and excellent demonstration of magic. Misbehavior loses the house points. At the end of the year, the house that has earned the most wins the House Cup. I am head of the Gryffindor House. Perhaps you will be sorted in to there, Mr. Potter. Of course, each house is quite respectable. Other than that system, however, I suppose it is quite like normal boarding school in the Muggle world, except you are taught magic."

To Harry, this sounded fascinating, and far better than life with the Dursleys. He could hardly wait to go to Hogwarts. He was quite disheartened when he remembered he had another month to spend at Number 4, Privet Drive before he was able to leave for Hogwarts.

Chapter 3: Through the Barrier

The night before Harry was to go to Kings Cross station in London, he could not sleep. He drank a bit of coffee in the morning before the Dursleys grudgingly rose to take on the laborious chore of leaving the comfort of their home. Harry was sure they wouldn't have done so if they really did not want to get rid of him. He was glad they did.

Their willingness to get rid of Harry drove them only to the station. They were no help upon arrival. They all but kicked him out of the car and threw his trunk and owl cage out after him. Hedwig shook her head indignantly and buried it under her wing.

"Sorry," Harry told her. "But you won't have to see them for a long time. Promise."

She looked up at him, and he gave her a treat. Hedwig didn't like the Dursleys. Especially Uncle Vernon who insisted she be kept locked in her cage. Aunt Petunia had nearly fainted when Professor McGonagall had brought Harry back with all his things. Hedwig, as though she could sense Petunia's worst fears, and promptly excreted upon the living room carpet. Uncle Vernon might have strangled the owl if Professor McGonagall did not threaten him with severe consequences.

Harry, his trunk and owl cage upon a luggage cart, pushed his way past the crowds of people in the train station. He watched the signs of the platforms as he passed them.

Six, seven, eight, nine, ten....

Upon reaching ten, Harry backtracked to see if he'd missed Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. After searching two times, he stopped a nearby conductor that happened to be strolling around near platform 9.

"Excuse me, sir," said Harry. "Could you tell me where I might find Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$?"

"No, I cannot!" snapped the man. "It doesn't bloody exist!"

The conductor stomped off, muttering about ruddy kids and idiotic jokes. Harry glanced at a clock upon the wall. It was dangerously close to eleven. The Hogwarts Express would leave soon.

He told himself not to panic as he headed back to search again. Then, a robed man with white hair and a young, pale boy passed him. The boy was pushing a luggage cart topped with a trunk very similar to Harry's.

Harry thought he heard the robed man mutter the word 'Muggles'. Harry rushed toward them.

"Excuse me, sir," said Harry. "Could you tell me where Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ is?"

The robed man and his son turned to face Harry with irritated expressions upon their faces. Harry noticed the boy looked to be about his age. His hair was so blond that it appeared almost white, it was also quite greasy. He had very gray eyes and pale skin.

"Another mudblood," sneered the father. "Come along, Draco, let's-"

The boy—Draco—caught sight of Harry's scar and smiled arrogantly.

"So," he said, cutting his father off. "You're the famous Harry Potter."

"Oh," said the father. "Most humble apologies to you, Mr. Potter. I did not recognize you. Ah, yes. You do have a scar...."

Harry couldn't tell if the man was being sincere in his greeting or not. He half sounded slightly sarcastic.

"My name is Lucius Malfoy," the man explained. "This is my son, Draco. He is now a first year, like yourself."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said.

Lucius Malfoy extended a hand. Harry shook it, and the man flashed a rather sly smile.

"Can you please tell me how to get to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$?" Harry requested again.

Mr. Malfoy and his son exchanged looks.

"You really were raised by some filthy Muggles, weren't you, Potter?" Draco asked him.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"I suppose that's why he wouldn't know where to find the Platform," Draco said, whether to himself, to Harry, or to his father, Harry was unsure.

"It would be my pleasure to assist the great Harry Potter in the first step toward his education," Lucius Malfoy said. He indicated the barrier between Platform's 9 and 10 with his hand. "All you have to do is walk straight through the wall there. You might start at a bit of a run, if you're apprehensive. Draco, will you demonstrate for Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, father, of course."

"I'll send you an owl at Hogwarts."

"All right. See you at Christmas."

Draco turned toward the wall, glanced around for any passing Muggles, and then sprinted toward the barrier between Platforms 9 and 10, pushing his luggage cart in front of him. Harry watched in shock as Draco ran straight through the wall. Nothing about magic failed to amaze Harry.

"Off you go, Mr. Potter," said Lucius. "The train will be leaving soon. Have a lovely year. I do so look forward to seeing you again where we can have a proper meeting."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry. "Bye."

"Good day, Mr. Potter."

With that, Lucius Malfoy glanced around, apparently looking for any more Muggles, and then spun on the spot. With a loud pop, he vanished. Harry thought he must have Apparated.

Shaking his head at the wonder of magic, Harry started forward, glancing for Muggles as he ran toward the barrier. His heart sped up with a rush of adrenaline and he shut his eyes tight in case the brick should decide to solidify and not allow him to pass.

At the last second, he opened his eyes. The wall was a mere inch from his nose. He closed them again-and then he went through. It was as though the wall hadn't even been there. He was now standing on a platform filled with hundreds of young wizards and their parents. Some of them were already dressed in robes, but most wore Muggle clothing like Harry. A large, crimson engine stood before them all. Golden letters upon a sign attached to its side read Hogwarts Express.

He started forward. Draco Malfoy came out of nowhere at his side.

"C'mon, Potter," he said. "Let's find a car."

"All right," Harry agreed. He wasn't sure if he liked Draco Malfoy, just as he wasn't sure if Lucius Malfoy had really, genuinely wanted to help him find the Platform or if the man was somehow amused by Harry's lack of knowledge.

Making their way through the throng of students, they entered a car near the front of the train and trekked through a narrow hall until they found an empty cabin. Draco opened the door and gestured for Harry to enter. Harry pushed his stuff in, and began to lift it up on the racks above the seats. Draco followed suit and did the same. When they were finished, they both sat down on opposite sides of the car.

Draco looked out the window to see the crowd outside the train thinning.

Harry followed Draco's gaze and saw a family of redheaded wizards bickering amongst themselves. A little girl was crying about something and a boy was arguing with two older twins that might've been two years older than him at the most. The boy appeared to be Harry and Draco's age and was probably a first year. Their mother, an extremely harassed woman that might otherwise look kind, was scolding each of them.

Draco snorted. "Weasleys."

"Huh?" said Harry.

"Those redheads out there," Draco explained. "Those are the Weasleys. One of the oldest wizarding families; they're pureblooded, but they might as well be a bunch of filthy mudbloods."

"What's a mudblood?"

"A mudblood is a Muggle born wizard or witch. They're not like us, Potter, you and me. You're a half-blood, right?"

"I don't really know," Harry admitted.

"I think James Potter was a pureblood," said Malfoy. "Your mum was Muggle born or half-blood, I don't remember the stories. Anyway, you're all right, Potter. Most half-bloods are just like mudbloods, stupid and arrogant. It's not your fault that you are, too. You were raised by Muggles. You couldn't have known anything. How did you stand the smell?"

"What smell...?"

Malfoy laughed. "It's a joke, Potter."

Harry didn't see what was so funny. He certainly didn't like the Dursleys, but he didn't really think they smelled bad. He couldn't see why this was so amusing to Draco. "So, what's a pureblood?"

"A pureblood is a wizard who's born purely of wizard blood, without a drop of Muggle filth in his veins, Potter. Purebloods are the best, smartest, most generous wizards. You'll find mudbloods and half-bloods and their ilk to be arrogant and stupid pigs. You have to watch who you make friends with, Potter. I can help you there."

Draco extended a hand.

Reluctantly, Harry shook it. He'd never really had a friend before.

"Anyway," Malfoy continued, "the Weasley family is pure scum. They're all pureblooded, of course, but you'd never know it. All of them are stupid, arrogant, and they live in a barn. They are the worst, filthiest, nastiest people you'll ever meet. Watch out for them, Potter. My dad works at the Ministry with their father, Arthur Weasley. The

man's a crackpot. Has an unhealthy obsession with Muggle rubbish."

"What's the Ministry?" Harry asked.

"The Ministry of Magic, Potter," Malfoy said with a hint of exasperation. "Merlin, you really don't know anything about our world, do you?"

"Not really," Harry admitted. "The Dursleys never told me anything."

"Yeah, I expect Muggles wouldn't. Stupid creatures; afraid of magic because they know they're too weak to defend against it."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sounds like the Dursleys."

"All Muggles are like that, Potter. None of them are any good."

Harry felt the train lurch and start forward. He looked out the window to see the platform slowly moving away. Parents waved at their children and shouted goodbyes. Harry could see the redheaded woman, Mrs. Weasley, and her daughter waving too.

"About time," said Draco. "Took them long enough to get moving. So, Potter, how'd you come to find out you were a wizard if the Muggles never told you?"

"It's kind of a long story," Harry said. "I got a letter from Hogwarts ages ago, but my Uncle Vernon threw it in the fire before I could read it."

Draco nodded. "He was obviously afraid that you'd learn magic and teach him a lesson."

"Probably," Harry said. "The Dursleys have never been good to me."

"Is that why you're wearing those clothes? Those are hideous, even for Muggles."

Harry looked down at his old, faded t-shirt and dirty jeans. Both articles of clothing were far too big for him because they'd originally been Dudley's.

"Yeah," said Harry. "They were my cousins. I've never had my own clothes."

"Really? That's ridiculous, Potter. I can't believe they were that horrible. It sounds low, even for Muggles. Your cousin must be a fat tub of lard, eh?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Really fat."

"I can tell. I hope those Muggles get taught a lesson someday. When the year's over, I'll come by and hex them if you want."

"But we can't use magic outside of Hogwarts."

Draco laughed. "I can. My father works at the Ministry. So can you, Potter. Any friend of mine is a friend of my father's."

Harry smiled. It was nice to have a friend, even if Draco Malfoy was a bit.... Harry wasn't sure what he was.

"Anyway, how'd you know you can't use magic outside Hogwarts?"

"Someone told me. Remember how I told you my uncle threw my letter in the fire?"

"Yeah."

"Well, they kept sending letters until my uncle sort of went crazy and took us to some cottage on an island in the sea. On the first night there, Professor McGonagall broke down the door and gave me my letter."

"Professor McGonagall?" Draco asked. "Wow, Potter. I'm surprised she didn't give you detention already. She's really strict toward everyone but her own house. Too bad we'll have to be taught by her."

"She's head of the Gryffindor House, right?"

"Yeah."

"What house do you think you'll be in?" Harry asked.

"Slytherin, of course. My father was in Slytherin. Anyone who's good for anything goes to Slytherin. I expect you'll be put in there with me, Potter. Anyway, Gryffindor's full of a bunch of stupid, pompous idiots. Hufflepuff is where the weak ones go, and I guess Ravenclaw is better than both of them, but Slytherin is the best."

"Who's the head of Slytherin House?" Harry asked.

"That'd be Professor Snape. He teaches potions. He's an old family friend."

"Oh," said Harry.

"Although... I just thought for something, Potter. Only purebloods go to Slytherin. You're a half-blood. But... you did defeat the Dark Lord. I guess that's got to count for something."

"Maybe," said Harry.

"How'd you do it?" Draco asked suddenly, his voice burning with curiosity.

"Do what?"

"Defeat the Dark Lord? How'd you get the scar?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I can't remember. I was only one year old, I guess."

"You cant remember anything?"

"Nope. Just flashes of green light."

Draco looked away thoughtfully. "Sounds like the Avada Kedavra curse."

"The what?"

"You know, the Killing Curse. It's one of the three Unforgiveables. Anyway, don't go around talking about it. I don't think first years are supposed to know."

"Right," said Harry.

"Anyway, sounds like the Dark Lord used the Killing Curse on you all. I hear that it's like a flash of green light."

"Could be," Harry conceded. "Professor McGonagall said I got the scar because dark magic was used on me or something."

"Wow," said Draco. "That's amazing, Potter. McGonagall's probably right. She might be a Gryffindor, but she's smart. I reckon she knows a thing or two."

"She seemed nice enough to me," Harry said.

"Maybe. But wait till you get her class. You'll change your attitude, Potter, I guarantee it."

"We'll see."

"Sounds to me like you're calling me a liar, Potter."

"No, I'm just telling you what I've seen."

"Ha!" Malfoy said. "What you've seen as compared to what I've heard from a lot of people. We'll see who's right in the end, Potter. I'll bet you ten galleons she assigns homework the first day."

"You're on," said Harry.

Draco laughed. "I feel guilty, taking money from you like this, Potter. You might as well just pay me now."

Draco looked toward the door of the cabin. Harry followed his gaze. An elderly woman pushing a cart filled with all manner of sweets stopped at their door.

"Potter," said Draco. He began to check his pockets wildly. "I think my father forgot to give me some money for the trolley. Can I borrow some of yours?"

"Sure," said Harry, pulling out his bag of galleons. "I've got enough."

"I'll take it off the price of the bet," Malfoy said.

Harry lent Malfoy a couple galleons and they each bought a few things from the trolley. Malfoy advised him to try the chocolate frogs. Harry ended up getting five of those and a couple licorice wands. The chocolate frogs, he was alarmed to see, actually looked like real frogs, albeit brown ones, and they moved in an alarmingly lifelike manner. He figured out the best way to eat them was to bite their heads off first. The licorice wands required a lot less effort, though they did not come with collectible trading cards.

Harry shoved his cards in his pocket. One was of Albus Dumbledore. Harry was surprised to see that the Headmaster of Hogwarts had accomplished so much, including finding uses for dragon's blood, collaborating with a celebrated alchemist named Nicholas Flamel, and defeating a dark wizard named Gellert Grindelwald.

After a time, there came a knock on the door. Harry opened it to allow a girl in. She had bushy brown hair and was carrying a book.

"Hello," she said. "My name is Hermione Granger, and... you're Harry Potter!"

Harry sighed. The scar was definitely too much of a giveaway. He wanted to grow longer hair.

"Yeah," he said.

"A pleasure to meet you," said Hermione.

"Granger," Malfoy said to himself. "Never heard of the Grangers."

"That's because my parents are Muggles. You look quite a bit like a Malfoy."

"That's right," said Draco. "Not as stupid as most mudbloods, are you Granger?"

Hermione gasped. "That's quite a despicable thing to say, Malfoy!"

"It's what your kind are."

"My kind? It's an offensive, prejudiced remark! I reckon I know far more than you about magic."

"Really?" sneered Malfoy, his voice dripping with cold sarcasm.

"Yes," said Hermione confidently. She turned her eyes to Harry, and focused on his glasses. They were broken at the nose, and he'd taped them to keep them from falling apart.

"Watch," said Hermione. She drew a wand and aimed it at Harry's face.

Harry braced himself for something horrible. It was too late to move. Hermione was already casting the spell.

"Reparo!" she said confidently.

Harry felt the tape fly off his glasses and disappear into thin air. There was a small click, and Hermione smiled victoriously. Harry removed his glasses. It was as though they'd never been broken.

"Wow," said Harry. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Draco sneered at her.

"Looks like your stereotypes don't apply to me," said Hermione. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I am helping a boy named Neville look for his pet toad."

With that, she promptly left.

Draco rolled his eye as the door closed. "Smart for a mudblood," he conceded. "But a bloody annoying know-it-all."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, at least with the know-it-all bit. He wasn't well acquainted with any types of wizards, so he didn't really know if they were all arrogant and stupid. Hermione was a bit annoying, but he was thankful she'd fixed his glasses.

It was beginning to grow dark outside. Draco looked at the window and reached up to grab his trunk.

"We'd better get our robes on, Potter. We'll be arriving soon."

"Right," Harry agreed.

He too reached up to grab his trunk. Draco closed the blinds on the windows of the cabin and checked to make sure the door was locked before he and Harry stripped down to their undergarments and threw on their robes. After finishing, Harry opened the blinds on the door first, and then opened those on the window looking outside the train.

In the far distance, he could see the outline of a great castle. Yellow lights twinkled from the windows. They were nearly there.

Yes. As promised, things are different. Harry is kinda sorta befriending Draco Malfoy. Crazy, huh? But if you think about it, had Harry never met the Weasleys, like in this fic, he might have listened to Draco's prejudices like he sort of is here. Anyway, more to come. Heh, wait till you see what happens with Snape.

Chapter 4: Sorting and Snape

Harry and Draco stepped out of the Hogwarts Express and into the rather chilly night air. They'd been told that their luggage would be delivered to their rooms. Harry was glad for this, because Hogwarts looked to be a long way off and he didn't want to carry his trunk there. Students upon the platform ran helter-skelter in all directions. Harry saw the lot of them boarding carriages. These carriages were drawn by nothing and moving on their own accord.

A very tall man, who was just as large horizontally as he was vertically, was calling for first years. He was standing a distance away near the engine of the train. He appeared to have long, thick, coarse, black hair and wore a massive coat that looked to be made out of several different animal hides all patched together. His hands were as big as trash bin lids. Harry could see them waving in the air.

Draco and Harry exchanged looks and started toward the large man.

"All righ'," he said. "You all best be followin' me, now. You won' be takin' the carriages till yer older."

"But... how will we get to Hogwarts?" asked a girl Harry had never seen before.

"Like I said, follow me."

"Excuse me," said Hermione Granger, piping up from somewhere in the crowd. Harry heard Draco groan audibly and turned to see him rolling his eyes. Harry couldn't help but grin.

"What're you looking at, Potter?" Draco whispered in a mock threat.

"I think you like Hermione," Harry whispered back. "I reckon you two will become great friends."

"Over my lifeless corpse," Draco returned. "All mudbloods are rotten, Potter, and so are half-bloods. You're the only one I've ever met that's all right."

"If you say so," said Harry.

"I do."

"I still say you like Hermione."

"Yes?" the giant man asked in response to Hermione's interjection. Draco had been about to say something back to Harry, but fell silent.

"Are you a professor?"

"No, no. Sorry abou' tha'; best be introducin' myself. I'm Hagrid, keeper o' keys and game at Hogwarts."

"Ruddy big guy, isn't he?" Draco said to Harry. "Looks like a bloody giant."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"Come along, then. Best not be wastin' time." Hagrid motioned of them all to follow and turned to walk down a path through the nearby thicket of trees.

He carried a lantern to light the way.

All the first years rushed after him, so as not to be left behind. In the thick of it all, Harry became separated from Draco and gave up looking for him after a while.

Hagrid led them through a relatively short path down to the shore of a massive lake that spread out before Hogwarts. On the shoreline were dozens and dozens of small, wooden boats with lanterns at their bows. Harry was near the back of the group of first years, and was unable to find a place in any of the boats.

Hagrid motioned for him to sit in the boat he occupied. Harry hesitated. The gamekeeper was really a large man. He feared the boat might sink.

Alas, he had no choice. Harry approached the gamekeeper's boat and took a seat behind the abnormally massive man. Then, as if by magic, the boats shoved off from the shoreline and began moving at a slow, but steady pace toward the castle looming ahead.

"Hello, there," said Hagrid. "Wha's yer name?"

"I'm Harry. Harry Potter."

"Blimey!" said Hagrid so loudly that several students turned to glance at him. He paid them no heed and grabbed the lantern off the front of the boat, holding it up in front of Harry's face so as to see the scar.

Once Hagrid was satisfied, he set the lantern back in its place.

"Well, wha' a righ' in'trestin' piece o' luck this is, eh?" said Hagrid. "Nice ter meet ya, Harry."

"Nice to meet you, too, sir," Harry said.

"Ah, don' bother with any o' this 'sir' rubbish. Codswallop, tha's wha' tha' is. Call me Hagrid."

"All right, Hagrid."

"Y'know, Harry, Professor Dumbledore wanted ter send me instead o' McGonagall to bring you yer letter. I even had a birthday cake made up for you. But, you jus' come by my house any time you wan' and I'll fix up a new one."

"Wow," said Harry. "Thanks, Hagrid."

Harry had never eaten a birthday cake before, at least, not one that had been baked for him. Once, he'd eaten a bit of Dudley's since Dudley was unable to finish it all, and Aunt Petunia had been watching her figure, and Uncle Vernon had been trying to lose weight. Dudley had tormented him for many weeks afterward.

Hagrid struck up conversation with Harry, and it was easy to talk with the strange, tall gamekeeper. Harry was glad to have someone to speak to as they floated across the lake to Hogwarts. It quieted his nerves; calmed the apprehension slowly grinding a hole in the pit of his stomach.

Hogwarts was amazing in its splendor, majesty, and scale. Dozens of towers and turrets jutted from the roofs of tall, stone structures, all interconnected by walkways, and bridges. Harry spotted a large viaduct. Buttresses stood high and tall. Terraces lined some of the towers and other structures. These were lined with blazing torches.

Every single window of the castle glowed bright in the dark night, like a thick galaxy of stars that had made its home on the ground. Harry's jaw dropped at the sight. He closed it immediately. He really had to stop doing that.

But Hogwarts was simply astounding. He'd never seen anything like it before.

Harry noticed, as they came even closer, that the castle stood on the edge of a large cliff, overlooking the lake. A cave at the water's level, lit by torches, glowed ahead. The boats filed in, and made their way to several docks at the end. Hagrid motioned for all the students to disembark onto the piers. He stepped ahead of them, and opened a door that led into the rock wall.

"Follow the staircase up, and wait for instructions. Good luck to all of you."

A student or two bade Hagrid goodbye. Harry waved and the gamekeeper game waved back. Then he was gone.

Once the first years had begun to file in, and Harry was moving up a curving staircase with the rest of them, the apprehension truly set in.

It was made worse by the hushed whispers of many of the students that carried in the staircase.

"How do you reckon we get put in our houses?" some asked.

The replies varied. All of them became increasingly alarming.

"I heard you've got to pass a test," one boy said.

"No, I heard that they cut open your hand and test your blood," said another.

"I heard you've got to fight something. Maybe a troll," said a redheaded boy Harry thought might be a Weasley. "I heard a lot of people die."

"That's rubbish," snapped Hermione from somewhere ahead. "Complete rubbish, not to mention illegal."

Someone that sounded quite idiotic to Harry told Hermione to shut up.

Everyone shut up in response.

After a time, they all came to the top of the staircase and into a large antechamber. Harry could hear the din of people coming from somewhere ahead.

The room they all stood in was windowless, and lit by torches in brackets upon the walls. Besides the door to the staircase, there was only one other, and it was closed.

As anxiety began to set in among the first years, the door that did not lead to the staircase opened. Several people gasped in surprise.

Harry was relieved to see a familiar face. Professor McGonagall stepped in. The door shut on its own accord behind her. She glanced around at the crowd of first years. For a moment, she and Harry locked eyes, but Professor McGonagall gave no sign of recognition.

The room was now deathly silent.

Out of nowhere, a frog croaked, and Harry could see it leap from the crowd on to the stone floor a few feet away from the hem of Professor McGonagall's emerald robes.

A young boy with buck teeth and brown hair leapt out to seize the toad. Upon catching it, he looked up to see Professor McGonagall staring out at him.

"In the future," said Professor McGonagall, "keep that toad in your possession, Mr...."

"Longbottom," said the boy sheepishly. "Neville Longbottom."

"Very well, Mr. Longbottom. Ensure the toad does not get loose in the Great Hall or you shall receive detention."

"Yes, ma'am," said Neville. He retreated back into the crowd first years.

McGonagall cast a sweeping look about the room again. Her expression was stoic.

"Welcome," she spoke, addressing all the first years. "Welcome to Hogwarts. For the duration of the school year, this castle will be your home. Very shortly, you shall be sorted into your houses. Here, your house is like your family. Good behavior and good demonstration of magic earns your house points. Failure to abide by the rules will cause you to lose points. At the end of the year, the house that has earned the most wins the house cup. It is a goal each of you should strive to achieve. In a few moments, you will follow me through these doors and we will go to the Great Hall where you will be sorted, after which, you shall take your seat with your house and the feast will begin. Any questions?"

A blond girl raised her hand.

"Yes, you there, young lady," said Professor McGonagall.

"Er... how do we know which house is which?"

"There are four tables in the Great Hall. To the far left, assuming one has just entered the Hall, is the Slytherin table followed by Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor. Any more questions?"

There were none. Or else everyone was too nervous to voice anything.

Professor McGonagall instructed them to wait there and disappeared through the door behind her. The tense anticipation and anxiety gripping the first years had momentarily subsided when the Professor had entered. Now, since she was gone, it was back in full force. Harry's heart was beating loudly in response to the thoughts racing through his mind of having to pass a test or fight something. He had no experience in magic. He'd never known Hogwarts or witches or wizards had even existed up until about a month ago. He'd fail miserably if there was a test, and then be sent back to live with the Dursleys. Harry never wanted to be back there now that he was away; now that he had Draco as a friend, now that someone like Hagrid would celebrate his birthday.

The door opened again, and the quiet buzz of nervous chatter in the room quickly dissipated. Professor McGonagall had returned, a small smile perched upon her lips.

"We're ready for you now," she told them. "Please follow me. Do not stray."

She turned and started out through the door. The first years followed her in to a large entrance hall with giant, stained oak doors to one side. They were led across the hall, through a rather plain corridor lined with torches and suits of armor, to a small rise of stairs and another door which was closed. Professor McGonagall opened it with a wave of her wand and stepped through. The first years were only able to follow two or three at a time.

Harry was close to the end of the line again. He could hear the gasps of the children ahead and wondered what they were surprised at. His heart was pounding so loudly in his chest that he could hear it as he stepped through the archway into a massive, elongated room. Before him stood four tables filled with robed students. They all wore silver badges, some of which were inlaid with red, blue, yellow, or green, depending upon which table that sat at. At the far end of the room was a raised platform with another table. There sat many adults dressed in robes. Harry assumed they must be the teachers. In the middle sat a man with long white hair and a long white beard. He was draped in midnight black robes decked in stars, and wore a matching hat.

The room, however, amazed Harry more than the size of the student body or occupants of the staff table. It was lit by hundreds, maybe thousands, of candles that floated in the air, far above everyone's heads. Above the candles, it looked as if there was no ceiling. All Harry could see was the dark, starlit, night sky.

"The ceiling is bewitched," he heard Hermione say in front of him. "It's made to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History."

Harry was amazed and dazzled by such information, although he wondered why Hermione simply had to know everything and share it with those around her. It made Harry feel even dumber since she was born to Muggle parents, yet knew more about the wizarding world than he did. He found it rather irritating.

Professor McGonagall led the students between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables, up the middle of the Great Hall. Every student watched them as they passed until they stood in kind of no-man's-land between the platform that held the staff table, and in front of all the student tables. Before the staff table sat a small, wooden stool, and upon that stool sat a hat that looked as if it had been through a lot in its lifetime. It was patched everywhere and had a massive slit at the brim. The first years, including Harry, all jumped in surprise when the hat twitched, and the rip at the brim opened like a mouth. The hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in the flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The entire hall burst in to applause when the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again. Professor McGonagall walked up to be at the hat's side, a long piece of parchment clutched in her hand.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she told them.

Harry sighed. At least there was no test, but that hat seemed to require too many prerequisites for a house. Harry wished there

could be another house that required you know nothing about magic, because he certainly didn't, and he felt too queasy to be brave, smart, loyal, or cunning.

"Abbott, Hannah!" Professor McGonagall called.

A nervous looking, pig-tailed, blond girl with a pink face stepped up to the platform, picked up the hat, which fell over her eyes, and sat down upon the stool. Harry thought it a good thing the hat was so big. At least he wouldn't have to see the whole school watching him.

There was a moment's pause.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat shouted.

A table behind Harry cheered as Hannah went to take a seat there.

"Bones, Susan," Professor McGonagall said.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat announced. Susan practically ran to the cheering table.

"Boot, Terry."

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Brocklehurst, Mandy" was sorted in to Ravenclaw as well. "Brown, Lavender," became the first new Gryffindor. Harry could hear the Gryffindor table explode with applause. "Bulstrode, Millicent" became the first Slytherin.

Harry turned around to look at the Slytherin table. They looked like quite an unpleasant lot to Harry, but he shrugged it off, assuming it was his imagination. Draco wasn't unpleasant, perhaps a little rude, but not unpleasant, and Draco thought he'd be sorted in to Slytherin.

"Crabbe, Vincent," became another Slytherin followed by "Finch-Fletchley, Justin" who became another Hufflepuff.

Harry noticed that the hat took varying amounts of time to decide where a person was to be sorted. "Finnigan, Seamus," for example, sat on the stool for a whole minute until the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

"Goyle, Gregory," became a Slytherin.

Then it was Hermione Granger's turn. She strode up confidently to the stool, almost ran, really, and promptly shoved the hat on her head.

"GRYFFINDOR!" announced the hat.

Hermione took off toward the Gryffindor table with a huge smile on her face. Neville Longbottom was called next and the hat took an incredibly long time to decide where he was to go.

A horrible thought struck Harry. Perhaps he would not be sorted into a house at all and Professor McGonagall would pull the hat off his head and say a mistake had been made. After all, he knew nothing about magic. Everyone he'd met seemed to. Maybe that's what was wrong with Neville.

Harry waited. Professor McGonagall might pull the hat off at any second and send the boy on his way. However, the hat proclaimed Neville a Gryffindor, and Neville ran, with the hat still on his head, toward the table. Red-faced, through gales of laughter, Neville ran back to hand the hat to Morag MacDougal before disappearing to the Gryffindor table.

After MacDougal, Draco Malfoy was called. Before the hat even touched his head it cried "SLYTHERIN!"

Malfoy swaggered toward the Slytherin table, looking pleased with himself. He caught Harry's gaze and mouthed "good luck, Potter".

There were not many first years left now.

"Moon... Nott... Parkinson." A pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil". "Perks, Sally-Anne..." and at last—

"Potter, Harry," called McGonagall.

Harry stepped forward amid many whispers.

"Did she say Harry Potter?" some asked others.

"Blimey, Harry Potter!" some exclaimed.

Still, others were unsure and asked, "is that the Harry Potter?"

Harry swallowed as he approached the stool. He locked gazes with the bearded man in the star spangled robes. Harry noticed the old wizard had a crooked nose and a warm, comforting smile. He looked at Harry over half-moon spectacles and nodded once. Harry took a deep breath, picked up the hat, sat down, and placed it upon his head.

It slipped down over his eyes. The hall was completely silent.

Harry swallowed again and waited.

All was silent for a time, until he heard the voice of the hat in his ear.

"Difficult, difficult," said the hat. "I see courage, yes. Not a bad mind.... There's talent... oh, yes! So much potential.... I see doubt, however, in your mind, masking a thirst for knowledge and to prove yourself.... Where to put you?"

"With my friend," thought Harry.

"Your friend?" asked the hat. "Well, therein lies a tie that is common to all houses, but I see your only friend, for now, sits at the Slytherin table.... Slytherin, eh? You could be great, you know. Slytherin will help you on your way to greatness, there's no doubt about that. You have a cunning mind, but you also have courage, Harry Potter. I stand at a crossroad...."

"With my friend," Harry repeated.

"Well... if you're sure. Better be... SLYTHERIN!"

Harry took off the hat and headed for the Slytherin table next to Draco Malfoy who was practically the only one there clapping. A few other Slytherins applauded warmly, but most looked at Harry with unfriendly, assessing eyes. The rest of the hall gave polite applause. Harry took a seat next to Draco, across from Crabbe and Goyle, and Draco clapped him on the back.

"Welcome to Slytherin, Potter. The hat got it spot on for you. You and me will be great, you know. My heritage and your defeat of the Dark Lord. We'll be the best students ever to come to Hogwarts, but I'll be better."

"We'll see," said Harry, feeling considerably better now, enough to fool around with Draco.

Draco laughed. Crabbe grunted something.

Harry looked up toward the staff table to see the old man looking at him in an appraising manner, but with a smile upon his face. He saw Hagrid give him a shaky thumbs-up, although Hagrid didn't appear too pleased. Another man, clad in all black robes, with greasy black hair that fell down nearly to his shoulders was also looking at Harry, albeit stoically. The man's black eyes seemed to be attempting to cut through him and find out what he was made of. Harry felt suddenly nervous and looked back at Draco.

"Who's the bearded Professor?" Harry asked.

"That's Dumbledore, the Headmaster," Draco told him. "Don't let his age fool you, Potter. He's a powerful wizard, but my father says he's been going a little crazy in the head these days."

Harry glanced back at the man and recognized he was indeed the one off the chocolate frog card.

"Who's the black-haired one?" Harry asked.

"That's Professor Snape," Malfoy said smugly. "Old family friend. I reckon he'll give Slytherin a lot of points because of you and me, Potter."

Harry wasn't so sure. He looked back to see both Snape and Dumbledore were now watching the other students as they were sorted.

Harry watched too.

A tall, black boy named Dean Thomas was put in to Gryffindor. Lisa Turpin became a Ravenclaw, Ron Weasley became a Gryffindor.

His whole family there cheered and then began to make fun of him, causing Ron's ears to turn bright red.

The last boy, Blaise Zabini became a Slytherin and sat next to Harry.

"Well done," said Malfoy.

"Yeah, well done," echoed Harry.

"Thanks," said Blaise. "Are you really Harry Potter?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Do you mind showing me the scar?"

Harry turned to fully face Blaise Zabini, and indicated the small, lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead.

"Blimey," said Blaise. "You are Harry Potter. Nice to meet you. I'm Blaise Zabini, but you already know that."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Nice to meet you."

They shook hands.

"You and I will become fast friends, Potter. My mum works at the Ministry. We have the utmost respect for the one who vanquished the Dark Lord."

"Er... thanks," said Harry.

They all turned at the sound of Professor McGonagall rolling up the parchment. She cleared her throat very loudly, grabbing the attention of the hall as she went to take her seat next to Dumbledore who was now standing.

"I would like to say a few words!" the old Headmaster announced. "And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddmont! Tweak!"

With that, he sat down to applause and laughter.

"He really is barking mad, isn't he?" said Blaise.

"Wow. I never thought my father was so correct," said Draco.

"Weird," Harry agreed.

Without warning, golden plates appeared before every student along with fine looking silverware. After that, dozens more empty platters and plates appeared in the midsections of all the tables, and then those platters were filled with all manner of delectable looking food. All the first years gasped. Harry's stomach growled.

"Let the feast begin!" Dumbledore called from his seat.

Harry immediately grabbed a goblet of some sort of juice which tasted amazingly like pumpkin. He stole a large, delectable looking steak along with a massive baked potato.

He dug in. It was the best food he'd ever tasted.

Draco and Blaise voiced their agreement with Harry about the food aloud.

When Harry was nearly done with his steak he looked up and gasped to see what appeared to be four ghosts float right into the Great Hall through the walls. A particularly sinister looking ghost drifted toward the Slytherin table in the direction of the first years.

"The Bloody Baron," said Blaise smartly. "He's the Slytherin House Ghost."

"We have a ghost?" Harry asked.

"Of course," said Blaise as though this was something meant to be blatantly obvious.

The Bloody Baron floated right through the table and then right through Harry. The sensation was peculiar and decidedly horrible. It felt, to Harry, as though he'd just been drenched in ice cold water.

The Baron harrumphed as he examined Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom were too busy stuffing their faces to notice his presence.

"This is an insult to my house," the Baron declared. "These idiots are far better suited for Hufflepuff."

Crabbe and Goyle both looked up at the Baron angrily, and Goyle threw a bare chicken bone. Harry turned to see it go through the ghost and fall on to the floor. The Bloody Baron narrowed his eyes.

Crabbe and Goyle immediately returned to their food.

"Very nice to meet you, Mr. Potter," said the Baron to Harry. "It is an honor to have someone already so great be a part of the Slytherin House."

"Er... thanks," said Harry.

The Baron nodded and floated off to mingle with the other students. Harry finished his steak, feeling quite full.

Then all of the food disappeared and was replaced by tantalizingly scrumptious dessert dishes. Harry immediately seized a treacle tart. He ate two before he could eat anything more.

Crabbe shoved his hand forward to grab the last treacle tart, and in doing so, knocked Harry's goblet of pumpkin juice down. It spilled all over Harry causing him to gasp as the cold liquid immediately soaked through his pant legs.

"Oops," mumbled Crabbe. "Sorry, Potter."

Crabbe smiled an idiots grin, indicating he was not sorry at all. Harry glared at him. Both Blaise and Draco looked as though they were about to say something, but then the desserts vanished and Professor Dumbledore stood again.

The hall fell instantly silent.

Dumbledore cleared his throat loudly to ensure everyone was giving him their fullest attention.

"Just a few more words, now that we are all fed and watered," said Dumbledore. "I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First years should know that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all. A few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling gaze settled on the Gryffindor table for a moment. Harry saw two of the Weasleys—the twins—smirk.

"I have also been asked by the caretaker, Mr. Filch, to remind you that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house team should contact Madam Hooch.

"Finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a most painful death."

A few people laughed, including Blaise. Harry did not.

"He's not serious, is he?" Blaise asked.

"Who knows," said Draco. "He's barking mad."

"And now," said Dumbledore, "before we all go to bed, let us sing the school song!"

Harry noticed Professor McGonagall's lips tighten. Professor Snape frowned. Some of the older students groaned.

"Everyone, pick your favorite tune," Dumbledore instructed. "Off we go!"

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they're bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we've forgot,
Just do your best, we'll do the rest,
And learn until our brains all rot."

Because everyone was singing in a different tune, people finished at different times. The Weasley twins were the only ones left, dragging the song out in a solemn, morbid funeral anthem. Many people laughed. Dumbledore smiled. Harry thought he must be mad since the Weasleys were obviously mocking the school song. Indeed, Professor McGonagall looked rather cross. Professor Snape looked irritated. Dumbledore conducted the Weasleys with his wand the last few lines, and when they finished, half of the hall laughed, half applauded, and Dumbledore both laughed and applauded.

"Music," said Dumbledore, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Magic beyond all we do here... And now, bedtime! Off you go!"

The hall filled with noise as people scattered up. Prefects called out to their respective houses to follow them, including the male Slytherin Prefect who had crooked teeth and a lopsided grimace. Harry, Draco, and Blaise moved to follow the line of Slytherins as the prefect led them out of the Great Hall and into the Entrance Hall.

While almost every other house went up the staircase to the higher rooms in the castle, the Slytherins followed their prefect down a different hall, and then down a narrow, dank, dark, spiraling staircase. Torches in brackets lit the way, the walls charred black behind them. The air grew steadily colder as they descended into the dungeons.

Upon entering one of the dungeon corridors, Harry tripped over something and fell flat on his stomach. The air was expelled from his lungs. He heard someone chuckle moronically. Harry stood up to face Goyle as the rest of the Slytherins followed the prefect further into the dungeons.

Draco and Blaise stopped with Harry to see what he was going to do.

"Look," said Harry to the dumb oaf that was Goyle. "I know you and you're friend have got a problem with me. Tell me why."

"Cus you landed mine and Crabbe's dad in jail, Potter," Goyle spat.

Harry thought Goyle must be daft because he had no idea how he'd done that. As he was about to voice this, Professor Snape appeared from the shadows.

"Mr. Goyle," said Snape in a drawling voice. "I suggest that you vacate these halls immediately and continue along with your fellow Slytherins before they realize the depth of your stupidity and leave you behind."

Goyle scratched his head dumbly. "Wha'?"

"Leave," Snape ordered, a dangerous look in his eyes.

Goyle promptly retreated further into the corridors, trying to catch up with the rest of the Slytherins.

Snape turned his icy gaze to Harry.

"You, Mr. Potter, would do well to watch your back. I have no great love for heroes such as yourself. As of now you are displaying a profound amount of ignorance, a trait not common among Slytherins. I suggest you become informed quickly, because I will not aid an ignorant child again. Have a pleasant night, Mr. Potter."

Snape spun, his black robes flowing behind him, and walked the opposite way down the corridor.

Harry stood there for a moment, completely confused.

"What was that about?" Blaise asked no one in particular.

"No idea," said Harry.

"Come on," Darco said. "Or we'll lose them."

The three of them rushed to catch up with the Slytherins. They reached them just as they stopped at a bare wall in a corridor. One

of the prefects said something, and the wall opened on its own accord. They all filed in.

"This is the Slytherin Common room," said the prefect.

Harry glanced at the room around him. It looked quite like a cavern. Water dripped down here and there from the stony ceiling. There were a few lit fireplaces with straight-backed, dark leather chairs in front of them. The place was decked out in green and silver tapestry here and there, and green-shaded lamps sat upon old antique tables.

"All right, listen up," snapped the prefect. "The door to the left at the end of this room leads down in to the girls dormitories. The door to the right leads in to the boys'. First years are assigned to the dorm at the bottom. Now get to bed, all of you!"

Harry followed the boys, Blaise and Draco with him, to the metal, barred door on the right in the very back of the common room. It looked like the door to a prison. Harry was near the back of the line. He stepped down into a narrow, winding staircase that descended in a very large radius. As they went further down, looking to reach the bottom, Harry got the impression that he was descending the stairs to the bottom of an inverted tower.

The stairs ended at small landings at regular intervals, doors inset in the curved walls to the left. At the seventh landing, the staircase ended. Draco opened the door there and they stepped into their round dormitory.

Harry was dismayed to see that Crabbe and Goyle were there already, as well as a boy Harry thought was called Theodore Nott. Each of them glared at Harry. He looked away and walked to the bed to his right, close to the door. His trunk lay at the foot, Hedwig's cage atop it. She peered up at him from between the bars.

Draco yawned, and sat down on the bed next to Harry. All the beds were draped with green curtains, and, other than the beds themselves, the room had no furniture save for a small oven in the middle used for making fires to keep them warm.

Silently, everyone tossed off their clothes and climbed in to their respective beds. Harry was unsure if he'd be able to sleep. The

tension in the dormitory was thick. Harry already knew Crabbe and Goyle didn't like him, and Nott, who looked to be far more intelligent than them, gave him glaring looks. Draco narrowed his eyes at Crabbe and Goyle and Blaise locked gazes with Nott.

Harry pulled the curtains around his bed shut and tried to go to sleep.

It didn't come easily. His mind was too jumbled with everything he'd seen tonight. Most of all, though, he wondered at Goyle's words, and at Snape's. He didn't know why Snape thought him so ignorant. Sure, he knew next to nothing about magic, but he didn't think that was what Snape meant. He certainly didn't know what he'd done to land the fathers of Crabbe and Goyle in jail.

When sleep came it was uneasy and plagued with flashes of green light.

For the record:

DISCLAIMER: I own nothing. Also, JK Rowling wrote the Sorting Hat's Song and the School Song. I simply stole them for the purposes of fic writing.

Chapter 5: Classes

Harry woke up a bit late in the morning. He'd been unable to fall asleep for too long the night before. The dorm was vacant, except for Draco who was lying quite still. The slow, rhythmic rising and falling of his chest indicated to Harry that he was still asleep. Harry glanced at the clock in the dorm room. It was quarter past seven. Next to the door to the staircase was a piece of parchment attached to the wall that hadn't been there the night before. It listed the schedule for Hogwarts. Breakfast began at seven on school days and ended at eight-thirty when classes began. Classes ended at varying times depending on a given student's schedule. On weekends, breakfast began at seven and ended at ten. Since today was Tuesday, it was obviously the first day of term, therefore the first day of school.

Breakfast had already begun, and Harry wanted to eat before attending class. He ran over to Draco's bed and shook his friend awake.

"Bloody hell, Potter," Draco snapped. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Quarter past seven," Harry replied. "Breakfast already started."

Draco looked at the clock in annoyance.

"Fine." He got out of bed and opened his trunk. Harry did so as well, and pulled out a set of robes. He was surprised to see that all of his robes now had silver badges on them, inlaid with the Slytherin crest. As Harry and Draco pulled on their robes, stockings, and shoes, Draco spoke.

"Do you happen to know what time classes start, Potter?"

"Eight thirty," Harry told him. "Says so on the sign."

"Good thing our common room is close enough to the Great Hall, otherwise I'd be mad."

"You seem mad anyway," Harry commented.

"Potter, you have no idea what it's like to get shaken awake by you. Bloody horrible. Don't do it again or I'll hex you."

"You don't even know how," Harry retorted.

"Want to bet on that, Potter?"

"Yeah, Malfoy. I'll take that bet."

Draco narrowed his gray eyes. "Let's go to breakfast."

Harry laughed as Draco threw open the door and started up the staircase. Draco muttered something about learning hexes, and then immediately putting them to good use.

It didn't take them long to get to the Great Hall. The doors were opened, and the place seemed to be mostly filled with tired looking students picking lazily at their delicious food. Only the first years at the front of the tables seemed to really be awake. The aroma of the food made Harry's stomach growl.

Professor McGonagall, standing just outside the Great Hall stopped them both.

"Potter, Malfoy," she said crisply. In one hand she held a short stack of small pieces of parchment. In the other hand she held her wand. She gave it a casual flick and two pieces of parchment shot from the pile. One flew toward Harry. He caught it. Draco received the other.

"These are your schedules," Professor McGonagall explained. "Your first class starts at precisely eight-thirty-seven. You will have seven minute periods in between classes to make your way to your next class. You will have Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, History of Magic, and Defense Against the Dark Arts every day, at least while you are first years. On Wednesday evenings, you will attend Astronomy. On select Friday afternoons, you will attend flying lessons. Times will be posted on the bulletin boards in your common room. Enjoy you breakfasts. I will see you in Transfiguration."

Malfoy grumbled something and walked into the Great Hall.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "I was disappointed to see you were not sorted in to my house, though I am sure you will do well as a Slytherin."

"Er... thanks, Professor," said Harry, unsure of how else to respond.

"Off you go."

Harry entered the Great Hall as Professor McGonagall stopped a few more students to hand them their schedules. The candles were nowhere to be found in the morning, and the place was lit purely by morning light streaming in through the windows, as well as the light the enchanted ceiling provided. Torches in brackets were still ablaze, however, at regular intervals along the wall.

Harry headed for the front of the Slytherin table. As he passed several Slytherins fixed him with glares. Harry ignored them and moved to the front of the table where sat Draco and Blaise. Harry did wonder why so many Slytherins looked at him with such hostility.

He took a seat across from Draco at the very end of the table with Blaise to his right.

They were both already busy eating waffles and French toast. Harry took a glance up at the staff table as he helped himself to a few waffles and drenched them in syrup. He noticed many of the professors were not present, but didn't pay any mind to it. It was only breakfast. Dumbledore was there of course, looking as odd and magnificent as he had the night before. Today he was dressed in violet robes.

Harry glanced down the Slytherin table as he took the first bite of his waffle. Goyle glared at him, and then shoved a whole piece of French toast in his mouth.

"Draco," said Harry.

"What?"

"Do you know anything about Goyle's father?"

"Yeah. As a matter of fact, he and my father were friends a while back. So was Crabbe's father."

"What do you reckon he meant when he said I landed his dad in jail last night?"

"Is that what he said to you, Potter? No offense, but you're a bit thick, aren't you? I suppose being raised by Muggles causes that. Anyway, you defeated the Dark Lord... somehow. Crabbe's father and Goyle's father were both followers of his. My father told me they were too stupid to evade capture after the Dark Lord disappeared."

"Oh," said Harry, realization suddenly dawning on him. "How does your dad know that?"

Draco shrugged. "He works at the Ministry."

After they finished breakfast, Harry, Draco, and Blaise looked at their schedules. The first class of the day was Transfiguration. Draco groaned at this sight.

"Watch, Potter. McGonagall's going to give us a load of homework," Draco warned. "Hope you got those galleons. You owe me five since I took the price down."

"Not how I remember it," Harry returned.

The first bell rang before Draco could retort, however. They gathered their books and headed off for Transfiguration. They had to stop and ask directions from a very short professor with a shock of white hair.

They arrived at the classroom several minutes before the bell rang, and they took seats next to each other in the very back. Harry was somewhat annoyed to see they shared Transfiguration with Gryffindors, because Hermione Granger was there. Draco groaned at the sight as well.

Of course, the presence of Gryffindors was nothing compared to what Harry heard some other students talking about. They were exchanging all kinds of unpleasant rumors about Professor McGonagall, who, even after the bell rang, was nowhere to be found. Harry started when he saw something out of the corner of his eyes. He turned his head to get a better look. A tabby cat was lithely walking down the aisle in between the desks next to him. He thought it odd that cats should be allowed to run amuck around Hogwarts.

Harry watched the cat, which no one else seemed to notice as they were all chatting amongst themselves. It walked up to the front of

the class, next to the desk of Ron Weasley who was talking to another Gryffindor Harry thought might be called Seamus.

Their voices carried.

"I heard she's barking mad," said Ron. "Takes away twenty points if you answer something wrong, even from her own house."

"Yeah," Seamus agreed. "Me mam had her as a teacher too, you know. I reckon she's got to be pretty old."

"Ancient," Ron agreed.

Harry gasped as the cat leapt forward and somehow grew in to Professor McGonagall. In an instant she was standing in front of Ron's desk. He looked up at her. Harry could see his ears turn red, even from the back of the class.

"Why thank you, Mr. Weasley," said Professor McGonagall. "I needn't introduce myself now. You so kindly did it for me."

Ron mumbled something.

"Oh, no," said Professor McGonagall. "I won't be taking any points. Your embarrassment is sufficient. Also, Mr. Weasley, take note that you may one day be slapped for speaking about a woman's age."

Several chuckles sounded throughout the class. Draco laughed under his breath. Harry couldn't help but smile.

Ron's head hit his desk with a loud bang as Professor McGonagall stepped toward the chalkboard.

"Welcome," she said, "to Transfiguration. I warn you. This will be one of your most difficult classes. Any foolish horse playing and messing about will not be tolerated. Now, I wish to demonstrate something."

Professor McGonagall flourished her wand, and the desk before her morphed in to a pig. Several girls near the front of the class squealed in fright.

"Don't be ridiculous, it's only a pig," Professor McGonagall chided them. "What you have just seen is very complex Transfiguration. You may be able to do it by your sixth year, but it is likely you won't be able to accomplish it until your seventh year."

She waved her wand again, and the pig was transfigured back into a desk.

"Today, we will be studying rudimentary Transfiguration. Please open your textbooks to page three."

The rest of the class was spent studying the basic, elementary theory of Transfiguration, followed by their first attempt at transfiguration which was to transform a matchstick into a needle. No one succeeded, although Hermione Granger managed to bring the end of her matchstick to a point. Professor McGonagall gave them all homework. They were to write an essay on the basic theory of Transfiguration, and practice turning a matchstick in to a needle for at least an hour. She warned them that she would know whether or not they did.

Everyone groaned when she dismissed them. Harry grudgingly paid Draco for losing the bet.

Next was Charms, taught by the short man Harry had seen before. He was called Professor Flitwick, and he had to stand on a massive pile of books in order to be seen by the class. The Slytherins shared this class with Gryffindors as well. Harry, however, was forced to sit next to Theodore Nott who accidentally managed to set Harry's parchment on fire.

Professor Flitwick extinguished the blaze and chided Harry for it, prompting a few laughs from the class. Harry, somewhat embarrassed, glared at Theodore Nott. He would get him back.

Much like the lesson in Transfiguration, they spent the class period studying basic theories-Charms, in this case. Flitwick, however, was much more animated than Professor McGonagall, and made a lot more sense. He was nice enough to assign them no homework.

After Charms, they headed to Defense Against the Dark Arts which was quite far away. It didn't help that they were required to detour around the third floor corridor.

Harry thought Quirrel, in his odd-smelling turban, was a rather by-the-books teacher which made him seem dull very quickly. His stuttering got old after a while as well. Like Charms and Transfiguration before, the Slytherins shared this class with Gryffindors. Harry was really beginning to get tired of Hermione's irritating ability to provide answers to anything a teacher might ask. And, with Ron Weasley's constant outbursts, all of which displayed what Harry thought was profound idiocy, he was beginning to think Draco was right about Gryffindors and pureblood traitors.

Quirrel didn't assign them any homework either.

Next, in History of Magic, everything changed. For the first time all day, Harry was surprised at meeting the professor who taught the class. Flitwick had been odd, what with his short stature, but Professor Binns was a ghost. Harry thought that might lend interest to the subject he was teaching. Muggle history had always been boring to him. He quickly realized History of Magic was no different and actually fell asleep until the bell rang.

When he awoke, the class was emptying. Harry's eyes caught sight of the board, which was filled with writing detailing their homework assignment. Harry quickly wrote it down, and headed off to catch up with Draco and Blaise so they could go to potions together. It was the last class of the day.

As Harry strode down a corridor that led to the Grand Staircase, a massive tower filled with moving staircases that was pretty much the heart of Hogwarts, Crabbe, Goyle, and an older Slytherin emerged from the shadows. They stopped in front of Harry, blocking his path.

Despite the fact that Crabbe and Goyle were both in his year, they looked to be a lot older than Harry. Certainly, they were taller. The Slytherin with them was definitely not in Harry's year. He was much taller than Crabbe or Goyle and looked much more imposing since he was so obviously muscled.

"Goin' somewhere, Potter?" huffed Crabbe in the brawny voice of an idiot.

"Yeah," said Harry, very much annoyed that these two by now. "Potions."

"Excellent," said the Slytherin behind Crabbe and Goyle who sounded much more intelligent than either of them. "Professor Snape doesn't appreciate tardiness."

"Yeah?" snapped Harry. Now he was without patience. What was their problem anyway? He could sort of understand Crabbe and Goyle, if their dads had really been in league with Voldemort. He understood how they could see it as his fault. But what of the other Slytherins? Why was he always receiving death glares? The injustice of such things made Harry's blood simmer.

"And how would you know that?" Harry asked the older Slytherin.

"Because I've been here for three years," the boy snapped. "Adrian Pucey. Chaser on the Slytherin Quidditch team. We're tired of you, Potter."

"Really?" asked Harry angrily. "I've never even met you. How could you be tired of me?"

"What I mean is that we're tired of what you are, Potter. You're a filthy half-blood. How you got sorted into Slytherin is beyond me. Your kind is disgusting. You shouldn't be roaming the halls. You belong in a broom closet."

Adrian Pucey smiled as Crabbe and Goyle rushed forward and seized Harry by the arms.

Harry dropped his books and things upon the floor as he struggled against Crabbe's and Goyle's hold on him. Ultimately, it was futile. They shoved in to a nearby closet. Adrian Pucey threw his things in there with him and then shut the door. Harry heard him mutter something from outside, and then the lock clicked.

Alarmed and annoyed, Harry tried the door handle. It wouldn't budge.

He heard the three Slytherins laughing as they walked down the corridor. Angrily, Harry pounded his fists on the door. They were going to make him late! He already knew Snape probably wasn't too fond of him. This would certainly not help change his views.

"Let me out!" Harry shouted.

"Alohomora!" said a voice outside.

The lock clicked again, and Harry threw open the door to find Hermione Granger. She jumped at the sight of him.

"Oh!" she said. "Harry Potter? Why were you in a broom closet?"

"Crabbe and Goyle shoved me in there!" Harry snapped. "What are you doing out here?"

"Oh. I stayed behind in History of Magic to talk with Professor Binns about the goblin wars. I do wish he would've gone over them more. They sound so fascinating. Don't you agree?"

"No," said Harry, gathering his things from the closet.

"Oh. Well, I find them to be quite exciting."

"It'll be exciting when Professor Snape gives us detentions."

"Oh, of course he won't, Harry. You'll simply have to tell him about Crabbe and Goyle. I'm sure he's reasonable."

"You ever met him?" Harry asked, starting down the corridor at a brisk pace. Hermione rushed to keep up.

"Well... no."

"Then you wouldn't know, would you?"

"I suppose not...."

"I've met him. He's the head of my house. Trust me, I don't think he'll like it that we're late."

It took them longer than usual to descend the Grand Staircase on account of the staircases themselves shifting at inconvenient times. When they arrived in the Entrance Hall, they practically ran to the staircase that led down in the dungeons. Shortly, they came to the door to the potions classroom. Harry hesitated before he turned the knob.

Everyone was already seated. Two spots were left at an empty desk in the very front. Professor Snape stood before the desk. He raised an eyebrow as Harry and Hermione entered.

"Mr. Potter," he said. "Ms. Granger. You are both late. Why?"

"Crabbe and Goyle locked me in a broom closet!" Harry snapped before he could help himself. The Slytherins snickered, as did the Gryffindors, though the Slytherins were louder. Draco and Blaise looked from Harry to Crabbe and Goyle with narrowed eyes.

"Temper, Mr. Potter," said Snape quietly. "Keep your temper in control. You are acting like a moronic Gryffindor."

Hermione and the rest of them frowned.

"Don't assume this will excuse your tardiness, Mr. Potter. You should be more watchful. Children will be children. I'm sure it was just a harmless prank. Besides, you are a wizard, are you not? How difficult could it be to unlock a closet door?"

"It's my first day," Harry said indignantly.

"Excuses, too," said Snape. "I do not tolerate whiners such as yourself, Mr. Potter. I also do not tolerate tardiness. Granger, you've lost Gryffindor twenty points."

Hermione gasped. "But, Professor! I-"

"Oh, yes," Snape began, cutting her off. "I am sure you were up to something of the utmost importance. I expect such excuses from Gryffindors. Take a seat."

Hermione moved toward the desk in the front of the class. Harry grudgingly started to follow her.

"Just a moment, Mr. Potter," said Snape. Harry stopped in his tracks. "You will be writing me an essay on why tardiness weakens the integrity of the learning environment. Ten inches of parchment on the subject. Due on my desk tomorrow. Now, take a seat."

Snape gestured for the chair next to Hermione.

Harry shot a look at Crabbe and Goyle who were both laughing.

"I'll get you back," he muttered under his breath.

Harry took a seat next to Hermione who seemed to be in some form of mild shock, having lost twenty points. Harry looked up at Snape who was looking down at him over his nose.

"You and Ms. Granger are now potion partners for the rest of this year," said Snape. "Since you were late, you do not get the privilege of choosing as did everyone else."

Snape turned on the spot and strode to the blackboard, his robes sweeping behind him.

Harry grabbed a piece of parchment and dipped his quill in ink for notes, as did Hermione. He put Crabbe and Goyle out of his thoughts for now. Their time would come soon. Snape wanted him to be a Slytherin? Wanted him to be sneaky, underhanded, and cunning? Harry could do that.

Snape used his wand to bewitch a piece of chalk. He turned to face the class and began to speak. As he did, the chalk wrote his words on the blackboard.

"Welcome," said Snape, "to potions class. Here I can teach you a great many things. Over the course of your years at Hogwarts, you will learn how to bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses. I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death.... Mr. Potter."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir?"

"Why are you not taking notes?"

"I didn't...."

"Think it was important?" finished Snape. "Anything on the blackboard is important. Or are you already a potions master? Arrogance is a trait of Gryffindors, Mr. Potter. Perhaps, if you already know so much, you can tell me what one of the main functions of aconite is."

Hermione's hand shot up.

"You see, Mr. Potter," said Snape. "Ms. Granger also believes she knows everything I have yet to teach. As I told you, arrogance is a Gryffindor trait."

Hermione lowered her hand in embarrassment.

"Now, what is one of the main functions of aconite?"

"I don't know, sir," said Harry.

"Very well. What, Mr. Potter, is monkshood?"

"I don't know, sir."

"As I expected. Where, Mr. Potter, would you look if I asked you to find me a bezoar?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, Mr. Potter, aconite and monkshood are one in the same. They are both names for a very poisonous leaf that is used in the wolfsbane potion. A bezoar is found in the stomach of a goat and can be used to combat many poisons. Why are none of you writing this down?"

Quills began to scratch parchment immediately. Harry rushed to take notes. Snape continued on with a lecture about the basics of potion making. He hardly paid attention to Harry again during the class, and instead humiliated various Gryffindors when they answered his questions wrong. He called on Harry only once, and Harry, by a lucky mistake, knew the answer to Snape's question because he had read a little of his books during the summer. Snape looked surprised to hear the answer from Harry, and he didn't call on him again.

At the end of class, Snape gave them all homework. He reminded Harry that the essay on tardiness was due tomorrow, and then dismissed the class.

"Mr. Potter," Snape called from his desk as Harry was gathering his things. "A moment, please."

Harry picked up his books and approached Snape's desk as everyone began to file out. Snape looked up at him.

"You had best learn to adapt to the way things are done in Slytherin, Mr. Potter. Your temper will not get you anywhere, and I will not tolerate it, especially if you do not have the necessary intelligence as a supplement. Learn to cope with situations, Potter, or you might as well leave this school."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he simply replied with: "yes, sir."

Snape sent him off then. Harry headed to the common room to get a start on his homework before dinner.

Okay, so... thanks for your reviews, and to all the people who put this on alerts! Seriously, I've got like 22 people with this on their alerts and I only posted this... 2 days ago? That's like a record. All right. You may now drop me off a review.

Chapter 6: Flying Lessons

Time passed quickly in Hogwarts. In what seemed like little more than a couple of days, Harry found himself a good week or two into term. He was already learning a lot about magic. Most of the things he was studying were quite interesting. He wasn't fond of History of Magic, nor was he enthusiastic about Charms. He respected Transfiguration, although he wasn't quite sure if he liked it. Professor McGonagall was simply too strict, and liked to treat them as though her class was their only class. Despite Quirrel's by-the-book methods and stuttering lectures, Harry also enjoyed Defense Against the Dark Arts. However, Harry learned very little from the man himself. The most he discovered was through reading his textbook for homework assignments. Professor Quirrel enjoyed telling the class stories about feats that Harry was relatively sure Quirrel had never accomplished. Apparently, he'd taken last year off to gain "practical experience" in defensive magic. During the course of that time, he'd allegedly developed a strong phobia of vampires, despite the fact he valiantly defeated one, which was apparently why his room reeked of garlic. He also claimed his turban was given to him by an African priest after he bravely killed a zombie. Harry still noticed the odd smell that seemed to hang about the turban and wondered if Quirrel ever washed it. He also noticed he frequently suffered from short-lived, acute headaches whenever Quirrel decided to talk about his exploits. Harry thought the headaches must be because of the stupidity of Quirrel's tales.

All the first years were being assigned large amounts of homework. Harry didn't always complete all of his, but he made sure that he put Transfiguration and Potions work first. Snape and McGonagall were both very strict.

Harry made especially sure that he did all of his Potions work correctly, and did it well. Sometimes, he even read ahead in his book after finishing his homework. Snape liked to criticize him. Harry decided he didn't want to put up with it. He already got enough flak from his fellow housemates, and, being a Slytherin, almost everyone else ignored him. Snape usually ignored Harry's accomplishments. It helped to have Hermione as a partner in class, too, even though she was insufferable. Harry learned to deal with it in order to ensure he did well in his work.

Sometimes, Harry thought he saw Snape watching him with narrowed eyes in class.

Every day as Harry walked into the Great Hall, the Slytherins gave him nasty looks. He knew why. He was a half-blood. They were all purebloods, or so they claimed. Only Draco and Blaise seemed to accept him for who he was. At least, Draco did. Blaise simply seemed to be following Draco's example.

On a Friday morning, Harry entered the Great Hall for breakfast and took his usual seat. At that precise moment, the morning post came. Dozens and dozens of owls swooped into the Hall, landing on tables in front of students to drop off letters or their subscriptions to papers or magazines. Harry had been alarmed to see every owl enter the Hall for the first time on the second day of term. Now, he accepted it as a part of life at Hogwarts. He had so far received no post. Today was no different.

Draco received his copy of the Daily Prophet.

He opened it up as Harry took a bite of his bacon. Draco's eyebrows rose at the headline.

"Here's something you don't hear every day," said Draco.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Gringotts was broken in to."

"What?" Blaise said with incredulity. "Give me that."

He snatched the paper from Draco, and his eyes raked back and forth across it, madly reading what it had to say.

"Blimey," he said. "Listen to this. 'Gringotts officials refuse to comment on when, but it is apparent that a break-in and attempted robbery did occur at the wizarding bank. The goblins are in an uproar and are currently attempting to discover how such a thing could have happened. The Daily Prophet has confirmed that the thief attempted to steal the contents of Vault 713 although it had apparently been emptied the day of the break-in, or else several days before. Unconfirmed reports suggest that this break-in actually occurred the day that the contents in question were withdrawn which

would have been at least a month ago, according to sources. The goblins refuse to comment."

"Did it say Vault 713?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," said Blaise. "Why?"

Harry shook his head. "It's just that... McGonagall took me to Gringotts first when she brought me to Diagon Alley. She got something out of Vault 713."

"Blimey," said Blaise. "That's strange, isn't it?"

"I reckon it's in the castle, then," said Draco. "Did you get a look at what it was, Potter?"

"No," said Harry. "I was wrapped up."

"Weird, eh?" Draco said. "But Dumbledore's always been off his rocker. He's probably hiding something dangerous or valuable somewhere. I can't believe anyone actually got into Gringotts, though."

"I know," said Blaise. "I've never heard of that happening."

"Gringotts is supposed to be the safest place in the wizarding world or something, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"Merlin, Potter, I keep forgetting you don't know anything," said Draco. "Of course it is! Those goblins are barking mad-bloody paranoid. That's why they have such good security. I'll bet they were trying to keep this quiet. Now that it's got out they're embarrassed. After all, they should be. Vile things. The only thing they're good for is keeping our money safe."

Blaise and Draco then launched in to a discussion about how vile goblins really were. Harry didn't pay much attention. He was too busy thinking about what Dumbledore would want to hide in Hogwarts. More importantly, why would someone want to steal it? Harry supposed it must be very valuable. That's why thieves stole things, after all, because they were worth something. Harry wondered how the thief had even managed to open the vault, or

even find it without the aid of a goblin. The tunnels under Gringotts were dark, and went on forever.

The bell rang and they shoved off for Transfiguration. McGonagall seemed normal today, despite the fact that the thing she'd withdrawn from Vault 713 was apparently an item that someone wanted to steal. Harry thought that maybe it wasn't that big deal. After all, the goblins were only in an uproar because someone had breached their security. It was also possible that the thief hadn't intended to break into Vault 713, and it was just the first one they happened upon. Harry wasn't sure. He dismissed it from his mind. It certainly didn't help him in class to think about it.

The day flew by. In potions, Harry received top marks in his essay on wormwood. All the studying had paid off. Snape looked at him every now and then in a way that suggested he was furious. Harry supposed he was just mad because he couldn't find a way to criticize him, and, on top of that, Harry was in Snape's house-Slytherin. That probably vexed Snape more than anything since Harry noticed the man picked favorites. He liked to torment the Gryffindors and reward the Slytherins-both for nothing at all.

When Harry, Draco, and Blaise entered the Slytherin Common Room, a new piece of parchment was tacked to the bulletin board. It proclaimed that the first flying lesson for first years would take place Saturday at ten in the morning on the front lawn of Hogwarts. Harry realized that the Saturday it was talking about was actually tomorrow.

"Finally," said Draco. "It's about time they actually taught us a few practical things. I'm sick of all these bloody theories."

Harry went to bed that night looking forward to flying lessons the next day. He thought it might be interesting.

It was indeed.

Unfortunately, the flying lessons that day were only for Gryffindors and Slytherins. Harry supposed the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws would learn a different day. He was annoyed to see his classmates. He'd grown less and less fond of the Gryffindors as each day passed. The Slytherins often looked at Harry in contempt and anger, and they never spoke to him. Crabbe and Goyle hadn't tried anything in a while, either. But the Gryffindors were another story.

Whenever he passed them, they bumped into his shoulder or tried to trip him. One, especially, the first year named Ron Weasley seemed to vehemently dislike Harry. It probably had to do with the fact that Harry called him an idiot one day in Transfiguration when he somehow managed to change his matchstick in to something that looked very much like a worm. Weasley was the only one, besides Neville Longbottom, unable to change his matchstick in to a needle properly. He was an idiot. Harry had just been stating fact.

Ron was there for flying lessons, too. He glared at Harry. Harry glared back. Hermione nodded at him without emotion, as she often did. Harry supposed she must like him a little because they were potion partners. He wasn't fond of her. She was bossy, conceited, and an all around know-it-all. So, like always, when Hermione gave her acknowledging nod, Harry ignored her.

The first years formed two lines facing one another. The Gryffindors at one side, the Slytherins on the other. They stood in the front lawn of Hogwarts. It was a wide open place, perfect for flying. Harry stood next to Draco at the end of the Slytherin line. A broom stick lay near his right foot.

Madam Hooch, a strict, gray-haired woman was their flying instructor. She walked twice down the lines, observing where they stood before she blew her whistle to draw their attention.

"All right," she said, "welcome to your first flying lesson. Today, we're going to mount the brooms, hover a little, and then land."

Several people groaned in disappointment. Draco was one of them.

"You'll find it's a lot harder than it sounds," Madam Hooch told them. "The second lesson is when we'll really get flying, so we'd best get this one over with."

Harry got the impression that Madam Hooch was not fond of teaching the first lesson.

She stood at the head of both lines, a broom down at her feet.

"Watch me as I demonstrate," she instructed. All eyes were on Madam Hooch as she extended a hand over the broomstick on the

ground. "Each of you, do as I am and put your right hand over your broomstick."

They all complied.

"Now," she continued, "say 'up.'"

"Up," said Harry in unison with everyone else.

His broomstick flew to his hand. He grabbed it in surprise. Almost no one else got the same reaction except Hermione who smiled smugly. Harry scowled at that.

Draco looked over at Harry and frowned.

"How'd you do that, Potter?" he demanded.

Harry shrugged. "I did what she said."

Draco scowled and said "up" again.

The broomstick at his feet sort of hopped off the ground, but otherwise did nothing. A few more people had called their broomsticks to their hands. Madam Hooch stood in place, looking impatient. She instructed them to mean what they said to the broom. Harry thought it rather ridiculous. His had come to him instantly. All he'd said was "up".

Draco's broom rose to his hand on the third try. He smiled, pleased with himself. Blaise snorted in irritation. It took him a few more tries to call his.

Weasley and the boy named Neville Longbottom were the last two to call their broomsticks.

Madam Hooch sighed. "All right," she called. "Mount your brooms."

Everyone copied her as she demonstrated.

"Now, I want you to kick off from the ground hard. You will hover for a few moments, and then safely land."

She blew her whistle.

Before anyone kicked off, Neville Longbottom shot into the air.

He cried out in surprise as his broom continued to rise higher.

"Mr. Longbottom!" Madam Hooch snapped. "Get down here this instant!"

"I can't!" Neville cried, rising higher with every moment.

"Mr. Longbottom, you will receive detention unless you come back down now!"

Apparently, Madam Hooch was under the impression that Neville was doing this on purpose. Harry knew better. Neville, a quiet, polite boy that never bothered Harry like other Gryffindors, was more inept at magic than Ron Weasley.

Neville continued rise higher. Draco shook his head and chuckled as Neville attempted to gain control of his broom and land. Everything went awry when he tried. His broom turned, and he flew over them, performing an involuntary barrel roll. Something fell from his pocket and landed at Draco's feet. It appeared to be a clear ball made of glass.

Draco didn't notice it. His eyes were on Neville as he flew at alarming speed toward Hogwarts. At the last moment, he pulled up, but lost grip of his broom. Neville squealed as he fell. Somehow, his robes caught on an empty torch bracket, high up on the wall. Harry watched as the broom flew up, rolled back in an arc, and then fell to the ground a ways away. Madam Hooch rushed up to the wall where Neville was suspended. Everyone followed.

With a loud ripping noise, Neville's robes gave way. He screamed in terror as he fell from the wall and landed on the ground with a thump.

"Away!" Madam Hooch snapped at them.

She quickly examined Neville, paying close attention to his arm.

"Tsk, ts, ts. It's a broken wrist," she told him. "Up you go, Longbottom. We're off to the Hospital Wing."

She turned to the class.

"If any of you so much as touch a broomstick, you'll be expelled faster than you can say Quidditch."

They all watched as Madam Hooch led Neville through the large, oak doors.

When they shut behind them, Blaise laughed.

"If he wasn't able to get that broom to fly, I'd swear he was a squib," Blaise said. He earned several chortles of laughter from the Slytherins, and even one or two from a Gryffindor. Harry shook his head.

Ron Weasley marched up to Blaise.

"Shut your mouth, Zabini," Weasley snapped.

Blaise laughed. "Or what?"

Ron pulled out his wand. "Or I'll hex you."

Harry stepped to Blaise's side.

"You couldn't hex the worm you Transfigured, Weasley."

Several people laughed. Ron's ears reddened.

"How'd you manage to become a Slytherin, Potter?" Ron snapped. "Wasn't your mum a—what do you purebloods all call them?—a 'mudblood'?"

Several Slytherins laughed.

Harry's face reddened in anger.

Hermione gasped and smacked Ron on the arm with a book she'd taken out of her robes.

"Ronald Weasley!" she snapped. "I thought you were better than that!"

"I was just giving an example," Ron snapped. "That's what they'd call her. I wasn't calling her a mudblood."

Harry narrowed his eyes, and felt a white hot anger erupt in his stomach.

"Don't you dare talk about my mother, Weasley!" Harry snapped.

"What's this?" Draco called from behind him. He was holding the glass ball that had fallen from Neville when he had been flying. "Is this a rememberall? Maybe if the poor, fat idiot had had this on him, he would've remembered to fall on his fat arse."

"That's Neville's!" Ron snapped. "Give it to me, Malfoy!"

"You want it, Weasley?" Draco sneered. He bent down, picked up a broomstick, mounted it, and kicked off into the air. "Come and get it!" he called.

Weasley, his ears crimson, picked up a broom and clumsily flew in to the air.

Harry grabbed one, too.

"Are you insane?" Hermione cried to all three of them. "You'll be expelled!"

"You heard what he called my mum," Harry snapped.

"That's no reason to behave like this! Besides, that remeberall's is Neville's, not Ron's!"

Harry ignored her, grabbed a broom, and kicked off, flying to Draco's altitude. Ron was near Draco, shakily balancing himself on the broom.

"Give it to me, Malfoy!" Ron demanded, "or I'll knock you off your broom!"

"Unlikely," said Draco with a sneer. "Hey, Potter! Catch!"

Draco reared back, and hurled the rememberall with all his might. Harry smiled, locked his eyes on the flying object, and zoomed

toward it. It curved down before he reached it, falling to the ground. Harry dived, extended his hand, and caught it before it hit the grass. He pulled up sharply and flew back in to the air, holding the rememberall up. Draco was staring at him as though he'd just birthed a baby and Ron looked livid.

"Want it, Weasley?" he taunted.

"Potter!" someone shouted.

Harry looked down to see Professor Snape standing on outside the great oak doors of Hogwarts.

"Come down here immediately," Snape ordered. "You as well, Weasley! And you, Draco."

Harry landed, gulped, and handed the rememberall to Blaise. He, Draco, and Weasley walked forth toward Snape who stood with his arms crossed at the door.

Harry knew he was in for it, by the look Snape had on his face. Snape had been waiting for him to screw up, and he had just screwed up royally. Harry looked at his feet when he reached Snape.

All was silent.

"Mr. Weasley," said Snape quietly, "I have called your head of house. I will lead her deal with you."

Professor McGonagall suddenly burst through the door.

"Mr. Weasley!" she barked. "I've half a mind to recommend your expulsion! Did Madam Hooch not make it entirely clear that flying was dangerous?"

"But they had the rememberall," Weasley muttered, his ears red.

"I don't care if they had all the lost treasures of Godric Gryffindor! There is no excuse for this sort of behavior. Detention for a month! You shall assist Mr. Filch in his night time janitorial duties."

"A month?" Ron cried indignantly.

"Indeed," said Snape. "Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy will share detention with Mr. Weasley."

"What?" Harry and Draco cried in unison.

"Be thankful you aren't expelled!" McGonagall snapped. "I shall be writing to your mother very shortly, Mr. Weasley. Off to your common rooms this instant! All of you, go!"

McGonagall strode quickly back in to the castle, her lips pursed, eyebrows drawn in anger. Everyone rushed to follow her, including Harry and Draco.

"Not so fast, Potter," Snape said.

Harry froze.

"I think you'd best accompany me to my office. We shall have a chat. Come."

Harry followed Snape down into the dungeons with the rest of the Slytherins, but instead of turning down the corridor that led to the common room, Snape led Harry the opposite way.

They reached Snape's office quickly. Harry stood before the large desk as Snape sat down. He shook his head, and then looked up at Harry with a rather chilling gaze.

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter. You've succeeded in disgracing my house. Quarrels are best resolved in shadows, Mr. Potter. Along with your detention, you will write me an essay on the functions of bat eyes in various potions. Twenty inches of parchment."

"Twenty?" Harry blurted out before he could stop himself.

"Are you deaf, Potter? I said twenty. Instruct Mr. Malfoy to do the same. His topic, however, is lacewing flies. This will ensure that neither of you cheat off the other. Mr. Malfoy will also provide twenty inches of parchment. Leave now. Try to keep in mind that you've managed to evade expulsion only because Professor McGonagall did not, regretfully, punish the Weasley boy in a similar manner. Fortune smiles upon you today. Keep in mind that if you should ever

be caught again in a situation similar to this, I won't hesitate to expel you. Now, I believe you have an essay to write."

Harry left wordlessly, wondering at Snape's words. It sounded to him as though he'd just been told not to get caught in a general sense. The way Snape talked made him think that Snape could not care less if Harry broke the rules, so long as he didn't get caught breaking them. It also sounded to Harry like Snape was quite infuriated by the fact that Harry had just been caught, and the only reason he wasn't expelled was because Snape did not feel comfortable giving a Slytherin, any Slytherin, a worse punishment than a Gryffindor. In Harry's mind, Snape had made it all perfectly clear. If Harry should ever be caught doing something against the rules again, Snape would punish him harshly. But, only if he was caught.

Harry made his way back to the common room. He found Draco and Blaise there waiting for him.

When he told them what Snape had said, Draco's face reddened.

"Weasley is going to pay for this one, Potter."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Come detention, we're going to get him back."

I know I've been updating fast, but this new chapter every day thing I've got going... it's not going to last. If it takes me 2 or 3 days, don't be surprised. I mean, it is pretty easy to write this for me. What's hard is plotting this out. Contrary to what you might believe, I only have a vague impression of what I am going to do, and I am working from idea to idea. You can expect Fluffy's grand appearance soon, and you can also expect an interesting Quidditch twist.

Chapter 7: Payback

Harry spent Sunday morning completing homework for Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Charms was easy; all he had to do was practice a very basic bit of magic. It was, in fact, the unlocking spell Alohomora that Hermione had used to get him out of the locked closet. Defense Against the Dark Arts was simple as well. Harry was positive Quirrel never graded anything so he could pretty much write whatever he wanted to. He spent the most time on Transfiguration. They were now focusing on turning a pencil into a feather. Harry had been assigned to write an essay on the theory. He didn't have the time or energy to read ahead in the book as he sometimes did because he still has Snape's essay.

After grabbing a quick bite to eat for lunch, he spent the rest of the afternoon writing about the uses of bat eyes in various potions. There were, Harry found, very few uses. He had to read up on the theories for each of the known uses and write about how they worked as he understood them. He was nearly finished when it came time for dinner.

He ate quickly and returned to the common room to complete the essay.

The influx of students entering from dinner distracted him. Nevertheless, he finished the last word just as he caught a figure in his peripheral vision. He turned his head slightly to see Crabbe headed his way, clutching a goblet full of pumpkin juice he'd somehow managed to smuggle from the Great Hall.

Crabbe, without warning, made a show of tripping on the footrest of a nearby armchair, and then ran for the desk at which Harry sat, goblet raised high in the air. When Harry realized what was about to happen, it was too late. Crabbe spilled his pumpkin juice all over Harry's essay, causing all of the wet ink to streak, and making large portion of the parchment unreadable.

"Oops," Crabbe muttered. "Sorry, Potter."

The Slytherins in the common room laughed as Crabbe walked away, apparently pleased with himself. Harry was so incensed that he had no idea what to do. It had taken him hours to write that!

Hours! Now he'd have to do it all over again. Crabbe was going to pay for this, Harry told himself. But he had to get his essay redone first.

Harry had no idea what he was going to do to Crabbe, but it was going to be horrible. It would be something that no one would ever forget.

Harry began to rewrite his essay. He was able to copy the introduction, which was still intact, but he broke his quill from pressing it too hard against the parchment. Furious at Crabbe, he ripped open his potion book to the wrong page.

There, printed in black and white, was his solution.

It came to Harry in an instant. What could be more humiliating than a love potion?

After all, Snape had gone over love potions with them a few classes before. Snape told them they wouldn't learn how to brew the simple love potion Harry had just stumbled upon for another week or two. It had also been made clear in that class that the product of a love potion was obsession, not real love. Harry could humiliate both Crabbe and Goyle at the same time. All he had to do was brew a love potion for Crabbe that worked to make him obsessed with Goyle.

Harry was unsure if he'd have his essay on bat eyes done for Snape by the next day. Snape would probably use that chance to humiliate Harry in front of the entire class.

Harry would make sure that Crabbe and Goyle were humiliated. He'd brew the love potion. It looked easy enough. All he had to do was obtain the ingredients. Tomorrow, they were supposed to brew a boil-curing solution in Potions. Recently, they'd concocted a hiccupping potion. The boil-curing solution would be their second potion. From Harry's experience with the first brewing, he knew how this process worked. Snape wrote the ingredients and instructions on the blackboard and then basically let them have at it.

All Harry needed to do was pick a few extra things out the supply closet to brew the love potion. It would be too easy.

The next day in Potions they were indeed assigned the task of brewing a boil-curing potion. Snape wanted it to be done with partners. He listed instructions on the blackboard.

"All right," said Hermione, getting the fire under the cauldron started. "We'll need dried nettles, crushed snake fangs, stewed horned slugs, and porcupine quills."

"I'll go get them," Harry volunteered.

"Good," Hermione said. "I'll make sure the cauldron is at the proper temperature. Make sure you bring back fifteen-"

"I can read the board," Harry told her.

"Sorry," she said as he walked toward the supply closet.

He got in line at the very end, waiting for his turn to gather the ingredients. By a lucky coincidence, the love potion he intended to make required very few ingredients and one of them was crushed snake fangs. Once everyone in front of Harry had their ingredients, Harry gathered his and slipped a few extra snake fangs in his pocket to be crushed later. Along with everything that was required for the boil-curing potion, Harry stole a bit of loveage, and a small vile of Ashwinder eggs. The vile had a charm placed upon it to ensure the eggs stayed frozen; otherwise they were likely to burst into flame. Harry had to remember that for later.

Pleased with the ease of obtaining the ingredients for a love potion, Harry brought the necessary items for the boil-curing solution back to Hermione.

Together, they mixed them up in the proper quantities. The instructions stated that the cauldron had to be taken off the fire before the porcupine quills were added. They did so before anyone else, and were done quickly. Snape all but ignored them and went on to criticize other Gryffindors.

That night, Harry and Draco had detention with Mr. Filch, along with Ron Weasley. Their detention began promptly after dinner, at about six o'clock and it would end near nine o'clock which was curfew in Hogwarts, meaning that everyone had to be back to their dormitories by that time. No students were allowed to roam the halls after dark.

Harry, who'd been looking forward to doing something to get back at Weasley did not get the chance. Filch told Harry and Draco they were to scrub the boy's lavatory on the third floor which had been closed due to a problem with the plumbing. Unfortunately, a pipe had burst somewhere and leaked waste all over the floor. The issue had been dealt with, but there was still the mess to clean up.

Harry and Draco spent three hours scrubbing the lavatory, all the while fuming about their situation.

At a quarter till nine, Filch appeared in the doorway.

"Time's up," he informed them. "Off to the dormitories with both of you. I'll see you tomorrow at six o'clock."

Harry and Draco exited the still-smelly lavatory and trudged down the corridor to the Grand Staircase.

They were both completely incensed about the entire situation, and all Draco could talk about was getting even with Weasley. He told Harry that they'd have to do something that didn't implicate either of them, but got Weasley in a lot of trouble. Harry agreed, but his mind was also on Crabbe and Goyle. Despite what Weasley had said about his mother, the event with Crabbe was still fresh in Harry's mind.

Luckily, he'd been able to redo Snape's essay, but it'd cost him a lot of time.

The Grand Staircase was mostly empty as Harry and Draco made their way down it. Everyone had probably already gone back to their common rooms since curfew was very close.

As Harry and Draco made their way in to the Entrance Hall, they ran in to Ron Weasley who looked just as angry as they felt.

Ron glared at them and started forward, purposely bumping shoulders with Draco as he came.

"Watch where you're going, Weasley," snapped Draco. "Although I expect that it's in your blood to be as stupid and clumsy as your Muggle-loving father."

All three of them stopped and turned to face each other. Ron's ears reddened.

"My father?" Ron bit back. "At least my dad didn't have to buy his way into his position."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I think it's time to settle this, Weasley."

"Oh, yeah?" said Ron.

"Yeah," Draco said.

"Right," Harry agreed. Now that he was face to face with Ron Weasley, all his anger about what had been said about his mother had been rekindled. Ron was just as bad as Crabbe and Goyle.

"Shut it, Potter," Weasley snapped.

"No, Weasley. No one talks about my mum. I don't care if she was Muggle born. She was definitely a better person than you."

"But you don't know that for sure, do you, Potter?"

Harry drew his wand. Both Ron and Draco did the same.

"We'll settle this tonight, Weasley," said Draco. "A wizard's duel. Midnight. Third floor near the statue by Quirrel's class."

"You're on," said Ron.

Draco smirked as Weasley continued on past them. Once he and Harry were safely in the Entrance Hall, nearly to the staircase that led to the dungeons, Harry spoke.

"Are you really going to duel him tonight?"

Draco laughed. "Of course not, Potter."

Harry smiled. "I thought not."

Blaise met up with them in the common room. They took a seat away from everyone else and discussed the detention and Weasley.

Blaise laughed aloud when he heard what Draco had done. Harry was satisfied. On top of the trouble Ron was already in, he'd get in loads more if he was caught. Plus, since Harry and Draco would be nowhere to be found, his story about going to duel them wouldn't hold up well.

There was a chance that Ron wouldn't be caught, of course. Harry thought the odds were high that he would, though. Even if he didn't, Harry was going to get revenge on Crabbe and Goyle. He needed to brew the love potion.

So as not to arouse suspicions, he went down to bed at the same time as Draco and Blaise. Crabbe and Goyle came down a few minutes later, followed by Nott.

Harry waited until close to midnight, kept awake by the anticipation of what he was about to do.

When he was reasonably sure that everyone in the common room would be in their dormitories, Harry slipped out of bed. Quietly, he opened the door to the staircase, and ascended slowly and stealthily until he reached the common room. It was empty. Harry smiled at his luck.

There was still a fire going in one of the fireplaces.

Harry suddenly realized he had no cauldron. Chiding himself for being so stupid, he went back down to his dormitory, quietly gathered his potion supplies, and then crept back up again.

He walked over to the fire and set everything down.

Then he began his work.

Once his cauldron was on the fire, Harry was able to start.

The base of a love potion was simply water. Harry obtained that from the lavatory attached to the Slytherin common room. Once he'd brought it to a boil, he took out the snake fangs he'd stolen, and crushed them to powder as best he could. He added that to the boiling solution, and then added the lovage. He stirred clockwise seven times as the directions instructed.

After adding a few more ingredients he'd taken from Snape's cupboard, the potion turned a light pink color. The last ingredient, before the essence of the one who was to be the drinker's object of love, or, more accurately, obsession, was the frozen Ashwinder eggs. Harry took out the vile of eggs he'd taken and opened the stopper.

The ice inside the vile began to melt as soon as the stopper was removed. Alarmed, Harry dumped the eggs into the potion. As the recipe said it would, it turned clear. Breathing a sigh of relief that the Ashwinder eggs had not spontaneously combusted, as they were supposed to if unfrozen, Harry took the cauldron off the fire to let it cool. Now all that was left to do was get a bit of the essence of Goyle.

Harry assumed his hair would do.

As his potion cooled, he crept back down to the dorm for the third time, armed with a knife from his potions kit, and skulked up to Goyle's bedside.

Goyle was snoring loudly. Harry was sure he was asleep.

He grabbed a small bit of Goyle's greasy, short hair as gently as possible, and used the knife to cut it off. Breathing in relief that everything had gone so smoothly, Harry ran back up to his potion and threw the hairs in. There was a loud hiss, and the potion returned to a deep pink color. Fluffy, vaguely heart-shaped clouds of smoke rose from the cauldron. Harry smiled. It was ready to go, and not all that hard to make, he supposed. He knew that he'd get good marks when they did this in potions later this week or next, as Snape had said they would.

Harry took a vial from his kit and filled it up with the potion. He didn't think he'd need any of the excess, so he dumped it down the sink in the lavatory.

After cleaning up his kit and his books, Harry returned to his dorm. By this time, it was a little past one o'clock in the morning. Harry yawned, completely exhausted now, and fell asleep quickly. He hid the love potion in his kit, and dreamed of using it on Crabbe.

He also dreamed of Weasley waiting for Draco to show up for the duel, and then getting caught by Filch and marched to McGonagall's office.

Harry woke up a bit late for breakfast. Everyone was already gone. Irritated, Harry made his way to the Great Hall. There was really no point in using the potion now. He'd already decided that he would wait until dinner.

When he arrived at the Great Hall, he sat down in his usual spot next to Blaise.

"About time you showed up, Potter," said Draco from behind his copy of the Daily Prophet.

"You couldn't have woken me up?" Harry snapped.

"I thought you'd get up on your own," said Draco. "Guess not."

Harry yawned, and casually glanced over at where Crabbe and Goyle usually sat.

Crabbe was pretty much right next to Draco, although he sat a ways down the table from him, crowding with the rest of the Slytherins. Harry shook his head. Too easy.

"Did you happen to see Weasley, Potter?" Draco asked.

"Why would I have seen him?"

"Because he's not in the Great Hall now. I thought you might've seen him come in."

"No," said Harry. "Do you reckon he was even caught?"

Draco put down the Daily Prophet and looked at Harry with a timeless, arrogant, exasperated expression.

"Potter, if he wasn't caught, I will chop my foot off and boil it in a cauldron."

At that very moment, the doors to the Great Hall opened and Ron Weasley entered looking harassed. Hermione Granger was right on

his heels, pestering him about something or another. She looked as though she was scolding him about something, but her eyebrows rose after he snapped something in her direction. She then proceeded to tell him something she thought was obvious. Harry saw Ron look right at Snape who was reading a copy of the Daily Prophet and looked rather bored.

Draco watched them both as well.

"Didn't even look this way," Blaise commented.

"Bloody hell," said Draco. "Do you reckon the idiot has some sense and knew I wouldn't be there?"

Harry shrugged. "Hermione looks irritated."

"That mudblood's always irritated," Draco said irritably.

Harry rolled his eyes. That was true. Hermione expected him to automatically know things from his Potions textbook that he wouldn't get to, even with his occasional reading ahead, till after Christmas.

The bell rang, signaling the start of classes. Harry patted the pocket of his robes to ensure that the vial of love potion was there.

The day passed by slowly, and it was rather uneventful. Professor McGonagall gave them a kind of pop quiz on transfiguring pencils into feathers. Flitwick rambled on for a long time about color charms. Quirrel told them all an epic, fantastic tale about how he defeated a mad hag through the use of a Babbling Curse, although he said that was too complicated for them to master yet. Hermione challenged his story on the basis that a Babbling Curse wouldn't defeat anyone because it only effected speech. Quirrel changed the subject and told them all to read their books. Harry fell asleep in History of Magic.

Potions, surprising, came and went with blinding speed. Snape ordered them to concoct a boil-producing solution using the instructions from their books. It was a bit more difficult than the boil-curing potion he'd ordered them to make the other day, and they were assigned to work alone. Harry was reasonably sure he got it right when he set a sample on Snape's desk.

Then it was time for dinner to begin. Harry gave Draco and Blaise the slip and followed Crabbe and Goyle into the Great Hall. As he walked down the aisle between the Slytherin and Hufflepuff tables, he slipped the vial of love potion from his pocket into his sleeve. Instead of taking his usual seat on the side closest to the wall, he sat on the side Draco usually did, a few feet away from Crabbe.

Draco and Blaise were not yet in when the food magically appeared. Crabbe and Goyle immediately dug in. Without a moment's hesitation, Harry uncorked the vial and dumped the contents into Crabbe's pumpkin juice before anyone noticed.

He smiled to himself.

Draco and Blaise arrived, and Draco gave him a questioning look since this wasn't his usual seat. Harry shrugged in response and grabbed a chicken leg.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Crabbe grab his goblet of pumpkin juice and down the entire thing in one gulp. The effect was almost instantaneous.

"Ifinklwoveyew," said Crabbe so quickly that it was almost unintelligible. Usually, he had to talk slow in order to be understood. Goyle looked at him for a moment in confusion, and then reached over to snatch one of the few remaining steaks.

Without a moment's hesitation or warning, Crabbe leapt over the table and attempted to plant a kiss on Goyle's cheek. He failed miserably and Goyle leapt back to the wall in fear. Crabbe slid over the table, knocking goblets and plates to the floor. Immediately the entire Hall fell silent as Crabbe stood up, arms outstretched. He very loudly proclaimed his love for Goyle, and this time it was quite clear.

Harry burst out laughing along with almost the entire Hall. Crabbe lunged for Goyle who sidestepped in the nick of time and sprinted for the door.

Very comically, Crabbe ran right into the wall, fell to the ground, and then stood up to pursue Goyle.

Everyone laughed as they watched him go.

Harry saw Snape rush by, looking quite annoyed. Professor McGonagall trailed close behind him.

"Do you think he's been confounded, Severus?" Harry heard her ask Snape.

"No, he's either the victim of a spell gone awry, or someone slipped him faulty love potion," Snape replied, loudly enough for most of the Slytherin table to hear.

"Oh, dear!" cried McGonagall. "We must provide him with an antidote!"

They both rushed through the doors of the Great Hall. Dumbledore stood up and clapped his hands to get everyone's attention.

"Well, with that... charming outburst, I think it is now bed time! Off you go."

Everyone, still chuckling, stood up and headed for the exit of the Great Hall. Draco laughed all the way there, mocking Crabbe's outbursts in a horribly overly dramatic way.

I do not care what you say. Harry might've come up with the plan too quickly, but ALL of you know the idea is funny as hell. At least, I think it is. I'd say Crabbe and Goyle were given proper payback. As for Ron... well. Think back to PS (or SS, if you don't know what the REAL canonical name was). Still to come (but not necessarily in this order): Quidditch stuff, Halloween, and Fluffy (although it may, in fact, come in that order, Xarkun doesn't know yet...).

Chapter 8: Quidditch

September bled into October quite quickly for Harry. A couple factors contributed to the days flying by. First was that the repercussions of the love potion incident had surpassed Harry's wildest expectations. Crabbe and Goyle were now both targets of Slytherin ire. This basically meant everyone in the Slytherin house, besides Draco and Blaise, completely ignored Harry and focused on humiliating Crabbe and Goyle whenever they got the chance. Provocations often led to fist fights, initiated by Crabbe or Goyle. They'd managed to earn themselves a month's worth of detentions as for one in particular. Snape was not happy with them in the least.

Harry suspected that Snape might actually know that the love potion incident was his doing. The day after it happened, Snape had looked to Harry once with narrowed eyes when someone laughed at Crabbe.

Draco's and Harry's detentions ended in October as well, so that was a relief. Filch had kept them busy, and he'd been quite efficient about it too. They'd both been assigned countless chores to do separately, as had Ron, so they hardly ever saw one another during detentions. Draco had tried to provoke Ron, and give him flak about the failed wizard duel, but Ron had turned it around on him. They'd both been stopped by Filch before it could escalate into anything more. After that, Ron Weasley hadn't really been a bother to Draco or Harry. He generally ignored them.

The second factor that contributed to September passing quickly to October was the fact that there was a buzz in the school surrounding the beginning of the Quidditch season. The first match, between Slytherin and Gryffindor, was scheduled for the first Saturday in October.

Harry didn't know what Quidditch was, so Draco and Blaise had explained it to him.

Apparently, it was the biggest sport in the wizarding world. It was a huge spectacle, much like football was in Europe. It was played on broomsticks. As Harry understood it, points were scored by throwing a ball called the Quaffle through one of three rings standing high in the air that served as goals on either end of an elliptical field. Each

Quidditch team was made up of three Chasers, two Beaters, one Keeper, and one Seeker.

It was the Chasers' job to get the Quaffle through one of the rings. This wasn't as easy a task as it sounded, since the rings were only just big enough for the Quaffle to go through.

The Beaters flew around and batted Bludgers at players on the other team. The Bludgers were balls whose only function was to knock people off their brooms. According to both Draco and Blaise, it was quite brutal.

The Keeper's job was to keep the Quaffle from going through the rings. He served as a goal tender.

The Seeker had the most important job. The Seeker's task was to catch a ball called the Golden Snitch. The Snitch was a small, golden ball that flew around the Quidditch Pitch during the game. It was apparently near impossible to see from much of a distance, and incredibly difficult to catch. When a Seeker caught the Snitch, his team was awarded 150 points, and that ended the game.

To Harry, it did sound rather interesting. Once he understood the mechanics of the game, he looked forward to watching it too. According to all the talk flowing around Hogwarts, the Slytherins were the favorites to win the game, and, for that matter, the Quidditch Cup that Hogwarts awarded annually. Apparently, the only things any Slytherins were concerned about were Gryffindor's Beaters, Fred and George Weasley-the twins. According to many people, they were probably the best beaters of any Hogwarts team. Other than them, the Gryffindors roster wasn't really filled with any exceptional talent.

The week before the first Quidditch match, the energy in the castle heightened. Tensions between Slytherin and Gryffindor rose. Several times, Harry was forced to avoid corridors because sports-crazed Gryffindors were ready to ambush any Slytherin they saw. Near the end of the week, Harry was sick of the Gryffindors. He purposefully walked down a corridor that he knew the Gryffindors would use as a spot for ambush, and, like he thought, he was ambushed by several Gryffindor first years. They were a lot more obvious than the older students. Harry had been studying Defensive Magic more. He'd learned two offensive curses. One that caused the

victim to break out in boils, and another that caused a very bad bloody nose.

He'd promptly cursed the Gryffindors that tried to ambush him. He'd gotten particularly good with the boil curse. After that incident, the victimized first years tried to get him back. They'd also enlisted the help of older students, but Harry gave them the slip. Harry was fast, and he'd learned quickly that you should never get into a fight you couldn't win.

Finally, the Saturday of the game arrived.

Harry, Draco, and Blaise made their way in to the stands around the Quidditch Pitch as early as possible.

The stands filled quickly with the entire school. The Gryffindors, and most of the people in the other houses, were dressed prominently in red and gold. The Slytherins wore their house colors as well, and a kind of cheering match erupted before the game began. Surprisingly, the Slytherins held their own. Harry, beyond annoyed with the Gryffindors, and now irritated with both the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, joined in the rather vicious chants the Slytherins concocted.

Down on the ground of the pitch, near the center, the teams converged and shook hands. The crowd erupted in cheering and anticipation mounted. The game was about to begin. Madam Hooch, who served as the referee, approached the two captains in the center of the pitch, clutching a large box.

The commentator, Lee Jordan, announced this.

"Madam Hooch brings the box to the center of the pitch. The teams mount their broomsticks. The Golden Snitch is released. Out come the Bludgers...."

Madam Hooch grabbed the Quaffle from the box and tossed it into the air.

"The Quaffle is released and the game begins!" Lee Jordan cried to a deafening ruckus of applause.

Immediately, one of the Slytherin Chasers seized the Quaffle, barrel-rolled to avoid an oncoming Bludger, and took off toward the Gryffindor goals. Harry watched in awe as he weaved around a Gryffindor Chaser, dodged another Bludger sent at him by George Weasley (according to Lee Jordan) and then hurled the Quaffle right through the Gryffindor Keeper's hands.

"Slytherin scores," Lee Jordan announced without much enthusiasm.

After Slytherin scored, the Quaffle was transferred to Gryffindor hands. All three Gryffindor Chasers formed a wedge, the one carrying the Quaffle flew at the point. The Slytherins circled to counter them. They created a defensive triangle before their goals. Two Chasers hovered near level with the middle, highest ring, and one hovered far below.

The Gryffindor wedge broke apart as one of the Slytherin beaters sent a Bludger their way.

The Gryffindor Chaser with the Quaffle zoomed straight for the center of the imaginary triangle the Slytherin Chasers had created. They converged on her, and she passed the Quaffle toward the chaser on her right flank. It was too late, though. One of the Slytherins intercepted, sped all the way across the pitch unhindered, and scored again.

Lee Jordan groaned. The Gryffindors in the stands booed. Harry cheered along with the rest of the Slytherins. Draco smiled and yelled something unintelligible at the Gryffindor Keeper who's name was Wood.

"Slytherin scores again," said Lee Jordan unenthusiastically. "C'mon Gryffindor, don't choke up now!"

"Jordan!" snapped Professor McGonagall. "How many times must I tell you that showing your bias is against the rules of commentating?"

"Sorry, Professor," said Lee. "Pucey steals the Quaffle from Bell, flies it down the pitch—ooh, he dodges a Bludger. Lucky there. That would've been a nasty hit. You'll get him next time, Fred!"

"JORDAN!" McGonagall cried.

"Sorry, Professor. Pucey passes the Quaffle to Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint. Flint feints and scores. The score is an unfortunate Slytherin thirty, Gryffindor zip."

"I swear to you, Jordan," McGonagall said, "I will give you detention and ban you from commentating!"

"Sorry again, Professor. Oi! Foul! That's Blurting, that is!"

Harry had no idea what Blurting was. The Gryffindors immediately booed in a dull, but loud chorus. Down the pitch a ways, Flint was flying side by side with one of the Gryffindor Chasers and appeared to be knocking her off course. He pulled away suddenly and then rammed into her. She fell right off her broom and into the sand below the rings on the Slytherin side.

The Slytherin crowd erupted in cheers as the Gryffindors bellowed cries of "foul"!

Madam Hooch blew her whistle.

"And Captain Marcus Flint is penalized for Blurting!" Lee Jordan announced. "Gryffindor is awarded two penalty shots!"

Harry watched as the players took formation near the Slytherin rings. One of the Gryffindor Chasers held the Quaffle. He hovered there for a bit until Madam Hooch blew the whistle.

Immediately, he feinted throwing to the right, and hurled the Quaffle to the left. It went straight through the Slytherin ring. The Gryffindors erupted in applause. Harry booed loudly along with his fellow housemates.

The next shot the Gryffindor Chaser took hit the side of a ring and bounced directly in to a Slytherin Chaser's grasp. The game began again.

The Slytherins scored once more. And suddenly things drastically changed.

"It looks like the Slytherin Seeker is on to something!" Lee announced.

Harry looked for the Seeker, he was in a dive behind the Gryffindor goals. He must've found the Snitch, Harry thought. They were going to win!

Out of nowhere, Fred Weasley swooped in and batted a Bludger straight at the Seeker. It caught him in the head. Immediately, he went limp, and fell from his broom to the field below. Everyone gasped in horror, including Harry. The rest of the Slytherins booed and made obscene gestures toward the Gryffindor team and spectators.

Incredibly, Madam Hooch blew no whistle. Two people rushed on to the pitch and carried the unconscious Seeker away.

"Don't they stop the game?" Harry asked Draco.

"No," Draco told him.

"But we have no Seeker! How can we win?" Harry asked.

"We've just got to score over a hundred and sixty points before the Gryffindor Seeker gets the Snitch, and we can't let them score again," Blaise said. Harry looked at him as if he were insane. Blaise shrugged. "It's been done before."

"But isn't that a foul?"

"No," said Blaise.

"It's a foul to try and knock someone off their broom, but it's not a foul to knock someone unconscious with a Bludger?"

"No."

"Weird game."

"It looks like the Gryffindor Seeker is picking up where the Slytherin Seeker left off!" cried Lee Jordan.

Harry watched in horror as the Gryffindor Seeker drastically increased his speed and extended his arm. One of the Slytherin

Beaters sent a Bludger his way, but it missed by a hair. The Slytherins booed.

Harry saw the Seeker's fist close.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle and the Gryffindors erupted in cheers. Some of the Slytherins booed. Most were too shocked to do anything.

The next day was absolutely atrocious. The Gryffindors were in high spirits from winning what should've been an impossible match for them. The only reason they'd emerged victorious was because the Slytherin Seeker had been on to the Snitch and the Gryffindor Seeker had found it because of him.

The Slytherins were in a collective foul mood from losing. Naturally, this bred even more conflict than usual between the two houses. More conflict than there had been in the week prior to the game, even.

Harry desperately wanted to slip some sort of potion into the goblets of Fred and George Weasley. He contented himself with hexing any Gryffindor first years he came across from behind. He knew that was probably a cheap thing to do, but they were gloating so much; he had to. Besides, first years were the only students he could successfully hex. Older students knew too much magic. Harry thought it would be foolish to put himself in harms way just to vent irritation. Not that he wouldn't love to go one on one with one of those idiots, but logic weighed out over impulse. Being the object of Slytherin ire for a while, Harry'd learned to trust his head a bit more.

Harry took a long, hot bath to relax that day. When he was finished, and striding down a corridor to head back to the Grand Staircase, the Slytherin Chaser, Adrian Pucey, approached him, carrying a piece of parchment.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he recalled Pucey had collaborated with Crabbe and Goyle to shove him in to a closet. Pucey scowled at Harry and gave him the message.

"Take it, you filthy half-blood," Pucey ordered.

Harry snatched the parchment.

"Message from Professor Snape, Potter," Pucey told him. "He wants you in his office. Right now."

Pucey smiled. He seemed to think that Harry was in some sort of trouble.

Harry's anger had been rekindled at seeing Adrian Pucey. He hadn't been on Harry's hit list before, but he was now. Harry resented being called a 'filthy half-blood'. He was no different than any other Slytherin. He was a member of their house! He hated the things they hated. He shared their values. The Sorting Hat had told him that Slytherin was a good fit for him. Harry was glad that he had been sorted into Slytherin, in spite of people like Pucey. Draco had been right when he said Gryffindor was full of arrogant morons. As far as Harry concerned, each one of them was a pompous, egotistical prat.

Harry opened the message Pucey had given him. It read:

Potter,

Come to my office immediately. I have important matters to discuss with you. Do not keep me waiting.

Professor Snape

Harry made his way to Snape's office. Upon entering, he found Snape sitting at his desk, grading essays.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape ordered without looking up.

Harry complied.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Potter."

Snape slashed a massive T (which stood for Troll, the failing grade in the Hogwarts curriculum) across the essay he'd just finished grading. Its author, Harry saw, was Ron Weasley.

Snape shoved the essay aside and produced an empty piece of parchment. He began to scribble out a note. Harry was unable to get

a good enough look at it in order to see what it said. Snape wrote for quite a long time. When he was finished, he signed his name below the paragraph he'd just written, rolled the parchment up, and handed it to Harry.

"What's this, sir?" Harry asked, taking the parchment.

"I'm getting to that, Potter," Snape said curtly. "Our current Seeker, as you no doubt saw, suffered a blow to the head from a Bludger. Unfortunately, the extent of his injury was severe enough that he was sent to St. Mungo's Hospital to repair brain damage."

Snape looked quite angry as he said this.

"He will be unable to participate in the upcoming game against Hufflepuff. Our captain, Flint, is being an idiot. Perhaps you know Adrian Pucey, Potter?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, scowling at the name. "I know him."

"Yes, well, Captain Flint wishes to play Pucey as the Seeker against Hufflepuff. I had the... privilege of watching the team's morning practice today. Pucey is atrocious at the position of Seeker." Snape glowered at Harry, as though what he was about to say was something he wanted desperately to keep to himself. "I refuse to lose to the house of Hufflepuff, Potter. That motley collection of dim-witted, useless fools is inferior to every other house in Hogwarts, not just mine, Potter."

Harry nodded his understanding. Hufflepuff was the house where all the waste gathered in Hogwarts in Harry's opinion. Arrogant, albeit courageous morons went to Gryffindor. Bookworms like Hermione went to Ravenclaw (Harry was unsure why Hermione wasn't one of them). According to the Sorting Hat, people destined for greatness went to Slytherin. Hufflepuff was where everyone else went. It was essentially the great, bland melting pot of the best of the rest. Harry, too, would be embarrassed to have his house lose to them.

"I saw you in that first flying lesson, Potter. When Mr. Malfoy threw Longbottom's rememberall, you caught it with, at least, moderate skill. This is highly unorthodox, Potter, but I want you to go down to the Quidditch Pitch tomorrow after classes for the next Slytherin practice. You will hand the message I have just given you to Captain

Flint. You will then try your hand as a Seeker. Desperate times do not suit me, Potter, nor do desperate measures. Unfortunately, they are called for. Do not disappoint me."

Harry had not been expecting this at all. Initially, he was shocked. Then he was excited for two reasons. First of all, he loved flying. He'd discovered that in the third lesson with Madam Hooch sometime ago when they'd really begun to fly. Harry wanted to learn more about flying than he did any other subject in Hogwarts. He also was excited because Snape had said Flint was going to go with Pucey as a substitute Seeker. Snape thought Pucey was a bad choice, and apparently thought Harry was better.

Snape might have just provided him with a very interesting way to give Pucey his payback for shoving Harry in that broom closet.

Yes. This chapter is short. Unfortunately, this one chapter per day thing I've been doing is wearing on me, and I'm trying to plot this out a LITTLE more slowly lest I dig myself in to a hole. Anyway, I'd like to note that there are now nearly 40 people with this fic on their alerts list. In my... 4 or 5 years of writing fan fics (I have another account), I have NEVER had that many people put a fic on alerts. About 23 people have this listed in their favorites. I've got about 2,300 something hits which I am happy with as well. I've also been getting loads of very thoughtful, kind, and intelligent reviews along with some critiques. Y'all are keeping me on my toes. No one's done that in a while. Anyway, you may now click the review button if you please. Next chapter to come ASAP. If you want, you can also follow me on Twitter. There's a link on my profile. If I get followers, then I'll be sure to update progress on chapters, plotting, etc.

Chapter 9: Halloween

A few weeks had passed in October since the first Quidditch match of the season. Harry's days had been filled with the studying of more complex magic in all of his classes. He had to make doubly sure that he read far enough ahead in Potions because Snape had taken a liking to assigning them complex quizzes that Harry found were easier to do if he read ahead and knew the theory about what Snape was quizzing them on. Transfiguration became exponentially more difficult, to the point where Harry would have been lost every day had he not already read what McGonagall planned to teach in their textbooks. He seemed to be one of the only ones that was smart enough to read ahead. Hermione didn't count. There was something wrong with her and the way she knew things was unnatural. It appeared to be effortless.

In Charms, Harry had also been forced to keep ahead in his book. They had just begun working on the most difficult charm they'd had to perform thus far. It was the Wingardium Leviosa charm. Flitwick told them it was sort of like a wizard's bread and butter, and it made things levitate. Harry, because he'd already read the theory, was able to make the feather Flitwick had given them to practice on hover for a time. Hermione was the only one to get it to actually levitate and have some degree of control over it right off the bat.

Along with the increasing difficulty of the various classes, Harry also had Quidditch practice to attend.

The day after Snape had given him the note to hand to Marcus Flint, Harry had gone to the Slytherin's practice. At first, Flint had been irked to see him there. Pucey had looked confused. When Harry handed the note to Flint, the captain's attitude had changed. He'd become nastily skeptical and irritated when he discovered that Snape had ordered him to let Harry try out for the position of Seeker. Pucey had been embarrassed and livid at the same time. Both of them had had a good, long laugh about the foolishness of even letting a first year attempt to catch a Snitch.

This, of course, had only served to motivate Harry. He hadn't much cared about Flint's attitude, but Pucey had long since drawn his ire. Harry had intended to brutally outdo Pucey, and so he had.

Snape had been entirely correct. Pucey was an atrocious Seeker. Harry would go so far as to say he royally sucked.

Flint had given them each the same challenge. Both would attempt to catch the Golden Snitch three times. Whoever caught it the fastest, or else the most times, would become the new Seeker. Harry had gone first, using a spare broom Flint dug out of the locker rooms.

Harry had been forced to wait thirty seconds after the Snitch was released into the Quidditch Pitch. Flint gave him the go ahead, and he took off in to the air, circling the pitch. Whether by luck, or skill (Harry wasn't sure which), he'd caught sight of a glint of gold. He'd raced toward it and found the Snitch. The thing dashed madly left, right, up, diagonally; in every direction even as it flew forward. It had taken Harry a good minute or two of chasing the Snitch before he wrapped his hand around it and snatched it from the air.

Flint had been shocked. Harry would never forget the look of plain astonishment on the captain's face.

Pucey went next. It took him half an hour to locate the Snitch and then minutes of pursuit to catch it. He'd lost it several times, and it had escaped from his grip twice. Flint, irritated that this was taking up so much of the practice, decided to award Harry the position of Seeker then and there, much to Pucey's displeasure.

When Pucey had argued against allowing a first year to play such an important position, Flint had told him to shut it and then explained why it was perfect. The Hufflepuffs would completely underestimate Harry and the Slytherins would wipe them out. Pucey had grudgingly accepted his previous position as Chaser, although he constantly glared at Harry during practices and looked as though he'd like nothing more than to strangle him. Harry smiled whenever Pucey did that just to irritate him. He knew Flint would murder Pucey if he did anything to hurt Harry, and thereby hurt their chances of winning against Hufflepuff. Though, if Pucey tried something, Harry was reasonably certain that he could use one of a couple of hexes on him.

Revenge was really sweet, Harry found.

Flint had informed Harry he needed a faster broom, because the extras they had just wouldn't cut it for a Seeker. Harry had been sent a catalog of the newest broomstick models in the mail the day after. He suspected it might have come from Snape, although the potions master gave no indication that such a theory was valid. Harry, under the advice of Flint, had withdrawn the proper amount of money from Gringotts and bought himself a Nimbus 2000. He'd made sure it was delivered to the Owlery so that he could smuggle it away without many people noticing.

The Slytherin team was trying to keep the fact that Harry was playing secret from the student body to raise the shock factor on the Hufflepuffs come game time. Harry only told Draco and Blaise who were both astounded by the news. Blaise seemed genuinely enthusiastic, but Draco seemed annoyed.

Harry also thought that a few key members of the staff, besides Snape, might know. Dumbledore looked at Harry a few times with a certain twinkle in his eyes that seemed to be congratulations. McGonagall had actually briskly voiced to Harry her congratulations one day after class. She didn't exactly look happy about it though. Harry wondered if Dumbledore had told her about it. He was sure that Snape was keen on keeping Harry's position as Seeker as secret until game time. Although, Harry thought first years playing might have been against the rules. He was sure Snape had at least told Madam Hooch. Dumbledore had probably found out through her.

Now, though, Halloween had finally come. Tonight was the night of the feast. Harry had been in the Great Hall earlier. He thought it was amazing. Where thousands of candles had once floated to light the room, there were now hundreds of jack-o-lanterns. Live bats also flew above them in swarms, but they never seemed to swoop down to the level of the tables. The tables had also been filled all manner of sinister plates, goblets, and even cauldrons. They were all empty, though, except for the bowls of candy corn spaced at regular intervals. Harry had spotted Dumbledore picking candy corn from the bowls here and there. The headmaster was humming some sort of sinister tune fit for the holiday.

Harry had not been able to enter the Great Hall at that time, as many other students were. He'd been quite overwhelmed with long Quidditch practices and the amount of homework he'd been given. Flitwick had assigned them a particularly long, grueling essay on the

Levitation Charm which Harry had not completed on time. Thankfully, and with good grace, Flitwick had allowed Harry an extra day to finish the essay. Harry thought this must be because he usually turned everything in on time, and had never once given Flitwick any trouble.

Unfortunately, Harry's new due date fell on Halloween, and he he'd been unable to turn the report in until after classes ended. Flint had annoyingly set a very quick practice after classes, though. Now that it was over, and the feast was beginning, Harry had to take his essay up to the Charms classroom.

He climbed the deserted stairs of the Grand Staircase. He was held up twice because of the irritating shifting. Finally, he reached the second floor, and made his way to where the Charms classroom was located.

He found Flitwick there, busy grading things.

"Ah, Mr. Potter!" the tiny Professor squeaked. "Do you have your essay for me?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sorry I couldn't get it to you sooner today, Professor, but...."

"Oh, it's quite all right, Mr. Potter, quite all right," Flitwick assured him.

Harry gave the tiny man his thanks and handed him the essay. Flitwick studied it for a moment, to ensure it was the proper length and such, and then set it to the side.

"It all seems to be in order, Mr. Potter. Off you go! Enjoy the feast. I expect this has held you up a bit. You'd better not dawdle, or it'll be half over."

"Aren't you coming, Professor?"

"If I can, I will. I'm a bit backed up on grading, though...."

Flitwick indicated the pile of papers before him.

"Ah," said Harry.

He bade the tiny Professor goodbye, and then strode out of the classroom and into the Charms Corridor. A few days ago, Harry had seen Filch emerge from a secret passageway just behind a tapestry. Harry stopped at the correct spot and brushed that tapestry away to reveal a bare wall.

Harry frowned. He really wanted to take the passageway. He had a good feeling it led to the first floor since Filch usually cleaned by floors by ascending number, and, when Harry had seen him, it was earlier in the day.

Harry just really didn't want to deal with the Grand Staircase and all its shiftiness. He was already late for the feast as it was.

A rather dirty brick in the wall behind the tapestry caught Harry's eye. Figuring that there was nothing to lose, Harry pressed his hand against it.

The brick pulled backward, seemingly on its own accord, creating a small niche in the wall.

Once the brick halted, a section of the wall, about as tall and as wide as a person, slid back as well, and then pulled to the left, revealing a narrow passageway. Harry stepped into it. It was completely dark. He heard the wall shut behind him.

Harry drew his wand.

"Lumos!" he said.

The tip of his wand flickered, and then lit. Harry smiled to himself. They'd only just learned how to perform that charm.

Harry made his way down the through the narrow passage which seemed to turn and twist in every direction, quite like a snake. Harry wondered if some drunken fool had haphazardly carved this passageway through the walls of Hogwarts.

When he reached the end, the wall there had a small lever next to it. Harry was now unsure whether he would emerge on the first floor or the seventh.

He pulled the lever, and the wall slid open.

He emerged in a corridor on the third floor. Harry cursed his luck and extinguished his wand. He supposed he now had no choice but to use the shifting Grand Staircase. Maybe he would get lucky....

Thankfully, he knew where he was. He took a turn to the right and walked along the wall. As he passed a closed door, a sound made him stop. It sounded as though someone was sobbing on the other side. Harry pressed his ear to the door. Indeed, someone was crying behind it. He wondered if he should sate his curiosity and find out who it was or just move and get to the feast. He was very hungry.

He decided he would go to the feast. Whoever was crying probably would not appreciate being bothered. Plus, in the end, Harry really didn't care who it was. The sound of screaming students made him freeze as he was about to take another step away from the door.

It had come from below. Harry was near the Grand Staircase. He heard it again. It sounded as though they were coming up in a panic.

Then a loud thump from behind him made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand up. He began to sweat as he turned around to look down the length of the corridor. He had to keep from screaming when he saw it. A tall, ugly, bald monster peeked its head around the corner at the end of the corridor. Even from where he stood, Harry could see that its skin was a sickly gray color and covered in what looked like many liver spots. It had beady eyes, a large, slack-jawed mouth, and a line of snot running down from its left nostril.

Instincts told Harry to freeze. Maybe it wouldn't see him if he didn't move.

Harry's heart was beating so loudly, he wondered if the thing could hear it.

It gave a grunt, sounding a lot like Crabbe or Goyle. Harry resisted the wildly foolish impulse to laugh.

The monster began to walk forward, across the end of the corridor. It had an enormous gut, and it was dressed only in what appeared to be a loincloth. Its gait was slow and lazy and its back was slouched.

Behind it, it dragged a wickedly huge club. Harry gulped. It could probably crush him in an instant.

Harry watched it disappear around the opposite corner of the corridor from the one it'd only just peeked around. Immediately, he seized hold of the handle to the door he was standing at and wrenched it open as quickly and quietly as he could. Without delay, he stepped into the well-lighted room beyond and shut the door behind him, taking care to do it silently. He flipped the lock on the handle, though he doubted that would do much good. He was reasonably sure that the horrible monster could break the very walls of Hogwarts with its club.

Harry started at the sound of someone sniffing. He spun to find himself facing a row of stalls. Normally, he would have died in embarrassment to find himself in the girl's lavatory, but right now the adrenaline was coursing through his veins and he really didn't care about where he was, so long as he wasn't in sight of the monster.

"Who's there?" he whispered into the lavatory.

"Potter?" a quiet voice inquired from behind a stall. Harry recognized it, but couldn't quite put a name to it. His thoughts were still revolving around the giant monster lurking just down the corridor.

One of the stall doors slowly crept open with a tiny squeak. Hermione Granger poked her head around it. Her eyes were red around the edges from all the crying she'd been doing.

"Potter, why are you in the girl's bathroom?" she snapped.

"I could ask you the same question," Harry returned, still listening hard for another sign of the monster.

"I am a girl, thank you very much," said Hermione indignantly. "Get out of here."

"No."

"No?"

"Granger, there is a huge monster out there. It's got a club. I am not going back out there."

"Harry, that's ridiculous. This is Hogwarts. There are no monsters in here. I would've read about them."

"Trust me, Granger. I saw this thing. I am not going back out there. Go cry in the stall if you want. I won't listen."

"Harry, have you been drinking any strange potions?"

"No!"

"Well, you're acting really odd."

"I'm acting odd? I was headed down to the feast. Then, all of a sudden I see a fat monster walk across the corridor. I think I've got a good reason to be acting odd. How come you're in here crying your eyes out?"

Hermione blushed. "It's nothing...."

"Right," said Harry, glancing back at the door.

"You're really scared, aren't you?" she asked him.

"Er... yeah."

"Harry, what did this monster look like?"

"Fat... ugly, bald head, snot running out of its nose. It was carrying a club."

"Hmm," Hermione looked to the left thoughtfully. "I suppose it could be one of many things, but it sounds a bit like a troll."

"A troll?"

"Oh, yes. They're very dangerous. Anyway, Harry, I'm sure you didn't really see a troll. There's no way one could be inside of Hogwarts. Don't you realize that this castle is protected by so many enchantments that even Dumbledore probably can't undo all-

"Hermione."

"Yes, Harry?"

"Shut up."

Hermione frowned at Harry as he listened. He thought he might've heard....

And there it was again.

A dull, loud thump coming from the corridor. The monster was out there again and it was walking down the corridor right outside the lavatory.

Hermione heard it too. She squeaked in terror and then promptly covered her mouth. There was a long pause between the previous thump and then the next as the monster continued walking.

Harry dashed over to Hermione's side, ready to clap his own hand around her mouth if she decided she had to scream or something.

They stood there for a moment, side by side, and listened to the footsteps of the troll continue down the corridor.

After a short time, they could hear them no more.

"Do you think it's gone?" Hermione whispered.

"I don't know," said Harry.

"Trolls are notoriously stupid creatures, you know. If it is a troll, then maybe...."

Harry shushed her.

He listened as hard as he possibly could and heard nothing except the beating of his own heart.

"Do you think it's safe?" Hermione asked.

"Dunno," Harry replied. "I think it's definitely gone, though. We should get out of here now. I don't want to stay here.... What if it comes back?"

"You're right," Hermione agreed. "Let's go."

Harry nodded. "Quietly."

The two of them crept toward the door. Upon reaching it, Harry slowly turned the handle, and pulled it open. He and Hermione tentatively stepped into the corridor and looked to the left.

At the very end of the corridor the monster, with its back to them, seemed to be fumbling with the door that led to the grand staircase. It broke the handle with one of its large fingers.

Hermione squeaked in surprise and terror.

The monster grunted and turned.

Its beady eyes seemed to notice them in the bright light from the lavatory. It grunted again, and reached for the club that it had deposited on the floor.

That was all the motivation Harry needed. He gave Hermione a tug and took off running in the opposite direction from the monster. Hermione rushed to follow him a second later.

As Harry sprinted for the end of the corridor, he could hear the troll bounding after them. Harry risked a look over his shoulder. Hermione was barely a few feet behind him, and behind her, the troll was gaining distance on them. For something so fat, it could certainly run pretty well.

Harry gasped and came to a halt at the end of the corridor. Hermione ran into him as he hesitated with indecision about which way to go. Harry looked behind him. The monster was nearly upon them.

He sprinted to the left. Hermione took off at the same time. The troll swung its club, swiping at the air occupying the space they'd just vacated. The club hit corner of the wall with a deafening crack, sending chunks of rock and a plume of dust everywhere.

Harry and Hermione ran down the corridor for their lives. The troll was in hot pursuit again.

As they came to the only turn at the end of the corridor, to the left, Harry risked another glance over his shoulder. The troll was barely ten feet behind them.

Harry and Hermione rounded the corner and came face to face with a closed door.

"No!" Hermione cried. "We can't go in there!"

"We've got to!" Harry snapped.

They ran toward it. Hermione took out her wand and aimed at the door.

"Alohomora!" she said.

Harry wondered why she needed to do that, but he didn't care. The troll was right behind them. Harry reached the door first, threw it open, and rushed inside. He could see the troll trying to slow down before it crashed into the wall. Harry slammed the door immediately.

There was a loud bang, and the entire wall before them rumbled. A slight pause. Then a resounding boom came from outside.

"Harry," Hermione whispered.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"We need to get out of here now."

Harry turned at the sound of a low growl.

He immediately saw a pair of giant paws standing over a large trapdoor. Harry's eyes trailed upward, until they came to rest on one of the three heads of a giant dog. All three sets of fangs it possessed were bared. It growled again.

Harry very nearly fainted.

He began to consider the options. What was worse? Getting clubbed to death by a monster or being eaten by a dog?

Harry decided that Hermione might be right about the monster outside being a troll. If it was a troll, it was stupid. If it was stupid, maybe they could outsmart it. This dog did not look stupid. It looked hungry.

Harry turned and wrenched open the door. Both he and Hermione stumbled out just as one of the dog heads lunged for them. They landed on the floor outside. Harry spun to slammed the door shut.

He heard Hermione breathe a sigh of relief over the growls of the dog on the other side of the wall.

Harry turned to see the troll. It was lying on the ground, apparently unconscious. Puzzled, Harry looked back at the wall and the door, both of which protected Hogwarts from whatever that three-headed dog was.

There was a large dent in the wall several feet above the door. It appeared as if an object had smashed into the brick and created a mostly-round indentation. It was somewhat jagged, on account of the bricks being crushed. Indeed, the remnants lay strewn upon the floor in a fine film of dust topped with several large chunks of stone.

Harry looked back at the thing. A small river of blood trickled down its head, seeping from the source of a wide cut.

"Do you think it's dead?" Hermione whispered.

"No," said Harry. "I think it ran into the wall."

"It must be unconscious...."

"Yeah," Harry said.

"Well... it's definitely a troll."

"Excellent, now I know what just tried to murder us."

Hermione didn't say anything.

"What was that other... thing, Granger?" Harry asked. "What was that... dog? How did you know it was there?"

Hermione turned to face him.

"Er.... It's a long story. When Malfoy told Ron he wanted a wizard's duel, I tried to stop Ron. Obviously, I was right to do so because-"

"Granger, get to the point."

"Well, Malfoy didn't show up and we were running from Filch. We... well we tried to hide in there with that dog-by accident, of course. When we were running from the troll, I didn't realize where we were until we got to the door."

"Well..." said Harry. "What was that thing, then?"

"I don't actually know," Hermione admitted.

"And you said there were no monsters in Hogwarts. What do you call that thing, Granger? A pet?"

"Well... I mean... there aren't supposed to be-"

"Good heavens!" cried Professor McGonagall as she rounded the corner, clutching her wand. Snape, Filch, Sprout, and Dumbledore followed her.

"Blimey," said Filch. "What the bloody hell is that thing, eh?"

"That is a fully grown mountain troll!" McGonagall said in alarm. Her eyes flicked from the unconscious beast to Harry and Hermione. "What are you two—explains yourselves! Both of you!"

"Er...." Harry trailed off.

"I heard about the troll in the castle," said Hermione quickly. "I read about them and I thought I could handle it. Harry..."

"I was on my way to the feast from the Charms classroom," Harry said. "I saw Hermione and then the troll found us...."

"The Charms classroom is on the second floor," said Snape. "What, Potter, are you doing on the third floor?"

"I took a weird passageway. I thought it might be a shortcut to the first floor. It led here."

"Ah, you dumb whelp!" said Filch. "I know what passage you're talking about, I do! It leads to the third floor!"

Snape shook his head. "Obviously, Argus, otherwise Potter would not be here."

"Right you are, Professor," said Filch. Snape looked as if he wanted to murder the foolish caretaker.

"What happened here?" McGonagall demanded. "Why is this troll unconscious?"

"Well..." said Hermione. "We were running from it, and we ran in there." She gestured at the door behind them. "I think it hit its head on the wall..."

The eyes of every adult present looked to the dent in the wall, then down at the door. McGonagall and Snape exchanged looks with Dumbledore. Filch scowled and Sprout paled.

"That corridor is strictly off-limits to students," said McGonagall sternly.

"We were running from a troll, Professor," said Harry. "I wasn't really thinking about what's off-limits and what's not."

McGonagall did not respond.

"What is that dog thing in there?" Harry asked.

The professors exchanged looks again. Filch simply rolled his eyes as though the answer was completely obvious.

"I suppose, since they know now, there isn't much harm in telling them," said Dumbledore.

"Headmaster..." Sprout began.

"It's quite all right," said Dumbledore. "It is best we explain this to them so they do not go around telling their classmates. You see, Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, that dog is acting as a guard."

"Is it guarding something under that trapdoor?" Harry asked.

There was a twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes. "Very observant, Harry," said the headmaster. "Yes. It is guarding something very important under that trapdoor; something that was left in my care."

Harry suddenly remembered the package McGonagall had withdrawn from Gringotts.

"What is it guarding, sir?" Harry asked.

"Well, that I cannot tell you, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Much too dangerous for young students to know. I ask that neither of you go around telling your housemates about Fluffy."

"You named it Fluffy?" Harry cried. Draco was right. Dumbledore had definitely lost his marbles.

"No, of course not," said Dumbledore. "I didn't pick out the name. Personally, I think he looks like more of a Gerald or something of the sort. His fur is quite coarse and not really very fluffy at all."

Harry simply stared.

"Hmm, too soon for humor, perhaps," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "I imagine the troll was quite a shock."

"Yes," said Hermione. "Er... how did a troll manage to get in here?"

"That is a question I would very much like the answer to myself, Ms. Granger," said Dumbledore. "I suppose we'd have to ask Professor-

At that moment, Professor Quirrel rounded the corner. He took one look at the troll and fainted. Harry was shocked that his smelly turban didn't fall off.

"Ah, here he is," said Dumbledore happily. "Pomona, would you please take Professor Quirrel to the hospital wing? Tell Madam

Pomfrey to give him something for the shock. I would like to question him."

"Right away, Headmaster," said Sprout. She drew her wand, and Quirrel levitated in to the air. Sprout turned the corner, the floating Quirrel trailing behind her.

"Now..." said Professor McGonagall. "Ms. Granger, I am very disappointed in you. You displayed a serious lack of judgment tonight. No first year I know of could take on a fully grown mountain troll and live to tell the tale. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Hermione looked down at her feet.

"Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, "I award you ten points to Slytherin; Ms. Granger, I award you ten points to Gryffindor in order to make up the ones you lost, and ten more to equal Potter's ten. I give these to you for sheer, dumb luck. You are both very lucky to have survived."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry and Hermione in unison.

"Off to your dormitories," Snape ordered.

"Oh, nonsense, Severus," said Dumbledore. "The troll is clearly incapacitated. It is not curfew yet. Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, since neither of you made it to the feast, I suggest you stop by the Great Hall before going to your dormitories. I believe the food should still be there. You may each grab something to eat. Then, I think, you should return to your dormitories. Well, off you go! Pip, pip!"

Yup. I killed 2 birds with one stone there, didn't I? Thanks again to everyone who's reading this. Next chapter will come soon. Although I don't think it'll be quite as action-packed as this one....

Chapter 10: Victors and Schemers

In the aftermath of the troll incident during Halloween (and apparently no one knew how the troll even gotten into Hogwarts), Hermione became considerably more friendly toward Harry.

Harry realized that Hermione's bossy, know-it-all attitude didn't bother him much anymore, but he wasn't quite sure if he felt like being as friendly toward her as she was toward him. His feelings for her were neutral. He neither liked nor disliked Hermione anymore. He no longer tolerated her in every class, but accepted the fact she was there. Once or twice, they even had amicable conversations in Potions. Hermione also helped him a lot more if he slipped up on anything, whereas she might have let it go before. Although, she had helped him before because she had some odd obsessive, compulsive habit of correcting people whenever they got things wrong. Harry had found it irritating then, because of her attitude, and her condescending way of speaking whenever she told him what he'd done wrong. Somehow, though, Hermione wasn't like that anymore. He appreciated having her as a Potions partner. It was useful when even reading ahead in his textbook didn't make things clearer.

Hermione's friendliness might just be a good thing. Harry wasn't sure. After all, she was a Gryffindor.

Something horrible had come out of the troll incident, however. The entire school had, naturally, found out about the manner in which the troll was dispatched. Rumors were running rampant that Harry, with the aid of his apparently great magical prowess, had killed the troll single handedly. That was probably the most reasonable rumor being spread. They became increasingly more far-fetched as time went on. Most people asked Hermione about what had happened. Even though she told them over and over again that the troll had simply run into a wall, they did not believe her.

Harry had been asked about what happened a few times by older students. He too had recounted the story, but not in its entirety. He didn't mention the three-headed dog to anyone. Dumbledore had instructed both him and Hermione not to. Harry was sure Dumbledore would know if they did. The headmaster was an odd man. He seemed to know many things.

Harry had no patience for any further questions from people wishing to know about the troll. He ignored them. He found that being in the public eye was not to his liking; especially when the public believed anything they heard.

Luckily, no one had gotten word that Harry would be the Seeker for Slytherin in their next match which was fast approaching. It would take place on the second Saturday in November which was only a few days away.

Harry felt weighted down by all the class work he was receiving. Midterm finals would be held before Christmas, and all the professors insisted that they begin to review what they'd already learned. It was their theory that one could never study too much, so they frequently gave homework assignments covering previous theories and spells. On top of the normal homework they already got, it was pretty exhausting. Harry, who had Quidditch practice on top of all of this found it a bit overwhelming. He spent more and more time in the common room whenever he was not practicing.

When the day of Harry's first Quidditch game arrived, it was a bittersweet occasion. On one hand, Harry was thankful because, after this game was over, he thought Flint might reduce the number of practices. That would allow him to focus on the academics of Hogwarts which he really needed to do or risk falling behind. He liked learning about magic, and he also liked the fact that he was on no professor's bad side, especially not Snape's or McGonagall's. He still wasn't sure that he was on Snape's good side. In fact, Harry thought that some days Snape might actually hate him. Other times, it seemed as though the potions master had no problem with Harry. The days when Snape didn't hate him outnumbered the days when he did. That was a good thing.

On the other hand, Harry was not thankful for the Quidditch game at all. In fact, he felt as if he might vomit.

Harry walked slowly to the Great Hall in the morning. He knew that he should probably be making better time than he was because it was Flint's intention that the Slytherin team get to the locker rooms as early as possible to reduce the risk of anyone noticing Harry.

Harry made his way to his usual spot next to Blaise and across from Draco.

Blaise was busy digging into eggs, bacon, and toast. Draco was absently eating pieces of bacon and seemed to be absorbed in a copy of the Daily Prophet.

Harry, feeling as though he probably shouldn't try to force copious amounts of anything greasy, syrupy, or scrambled in to his tumultuous stomach decided to eat only a piece of buttered toast. He found he couldn't finish it. The butterflies in his stomach simply would not allow their space to be shared.

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Blaise told him.

"Yeah..." said Harry, compliantly responding to Blaise's encouragement in a detached manner.

"Suck it up, Potter," Draco said. "Just get out there and win the bloody thing."

Draco harshly folded his copy of the Prophet and set it down next to his plate. Harry paid little attention to him, but he had the distinct impression that Draco must be jealous of him. Harry really couldn't imagine why. Crumbling under nerves and suffocating under the pressure to win against Hufflepuffs was not something to be envied in Harry's expert opinion. He wished that he could make a calming potion.

Harry saw Flint rise. Several other Slytherins who were not on the team did as well. They had no idea that Harry was the Seeker, but Flint had simply told them to leave when the team did. He gave no verbal reason. The captain was physically imposing and many of the students were young. They did as they were told, even if it meant missing breakfast and going hungry for the game. It was reasonable to suggest that they didn't really need any motivation other than Flint's word. They came along to mask Harry's involvement with the team, of course.

So, Harry, right on cue, stood up and left with them. Blaise wished Harry good luck under his breath and told him to destroy the Hufflepuffs. Draco grunted goodbye.

Harry followed the team and the random assortment of other Slytherins out of the Great Hall. They exited the large, oak front

doors and made their way across the vast expanse of the lawn toward the Quidditch Pitch which looked imposing in the distance. The air was cold. Harry could see his and everyone else's breath coming out in little puffs. The sky was gray and bleak. The first snowfall of the season had arrived a week or two earlier, but none of it stuck. Harry thought it looked like it might snow today.

When they arrived at the Quidditch Pitch, the younger Slytherins immediately branched off to climb on to the stands in order to be away from Flint. Harry, before following his team into the Slytherin locker rooms, took one look back at the castle. In the distance, he could see the Hufflepuff team striding down the lawn. A large bit of the Hufflepuff house seemed to be following them. They could have been Gryffindors or Ravenclaws, though. The three houses, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor, tended to root for one another when playing Slytherin, and all wore the playing house's colors. Thus, the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors would be in yellow today in alliance with the Hufflepuffs. At first, Harry had been annoyed to see the unity between the three houses during the Slytherin and Gryffindor name. Now he felt sick at the sight of it.

He entered the warm locker room and dressed in his Quidditch gear in silence. He grabbed his Nimbus 2000 which he'd found was extremely fast and nimble, and sat down on the bench with the rest of the team to hear Flint layout the game plan for them. Harry really didn't listen to the strategies he went over with the Chasers and Beaters, or what he reminded the Keeper to be on the lookout for. Harry heard Flint tell them to start knocking Hufflepuffs off their brooms if things deteriorated.

Then Flint called his name: "Potter!"

Harry looked up.

"Potter, you focus on catching that Snitch. Do it fast. Those Hufflepuff chasers might be a bunch of misfits and mudbloods, but they're a damn lot better than the Gryffindors. I want to end this game quickly. It's cold out there and I don't want to risk the Hufflepuff's Seeker catching it before you do. Remember, if he sees it before you, knock right off his broom. Got that, Potter?"

"Yeah," Harry said and nodded.

"You look sick, Potter," Pucey commented. Harry couldn't tell if his tone was concerned or mocking.

"Nervous," Harry explained.

"Well, suck it up. You'd better catch that bloody Snitch."

"Shut it, Pucey," snapped Flint. "We all understand what we have to do?"

The Slytherin team, except for Harry, all voiced their understanding loudly.

"All right! Let's go kill us some badgers, boys!"

Everyone laughed and cheered. They stood to their feet to make their way to the tunnel that led to the pitch. Harry could hear the people above them taking their seats. Soon the stands would be full and the whole school would be watching as Harry made his way out on to the pitch.

Harry really felt like he might be sick. He was deathly afraid of staining his emerald Quidditch robes with vomit. That would be more embarrassing than anything else. That was probably why he didn't vomit; or else it was because he didn't have enough in his stomach.

Harry heard Madam Hooch blow the whistle from on the pitch. The Slytherin team stepped outside. Harry was the last to do so. The rush of cold morning air immediately assaulted him. He was too nervous to shiver.

Immediately he heard cries from the stands behind him.

"Blimey! Is that Harry Potter?" some cried.

"What the bloody hell is this?" others demanded.

Some of them cheered at the sight of Harry, probably because they thought he'd ensure their victory. Harry expected that they were rooting for Hufflepuff, but he didn't want to look. Other spectators simply burst into choruses of raucous laughter.

Harry gulped as he approached center field where the box and Madam Hooch stood. He waited as Flint shook hands with the Hufflepuff captain. Both of them looked as though they were trying to crush the other's hand. Neither of them showed any indication of the pain when they pulled away.

"All right," said Madam Hooch. "I want a nice, clean game from all of you. Is that clear?"

Everyone agreed it was.

"Are you all right, Potter?" Madam Hooch asked.

The Hufflepuff team seemed to notice him for the first time.

"What's this?" one of them asked. "Potter? He's just a first year!"

"The headmaster has given him special permission to play," Madam Hooch informed them.

Harry heard them laughing quietly.

"Are you all right, Potter?" Madam Hooch repeated her question. "You look ill."

"I'm fine," Harry said.

"Very well. Mount up."

They all complied and kicked off from the ground, hovering in a circle around the box. Harry watched as the two Bludgers zoomed into the air, followed by the Snitch which zipped right past his nose. Harry had to resist the urge to grab it right there. Finally, Madam Hooch threw the Quaffle into the air and blew the whistle.

The crowd erupted into a deafening crescendo of cheers.

Harry immediately pulled away from the teams and began to circle the pitch.

Once in the air, it was as if the butterflies in his stomach had been left upon the ground. He ignored the jeers and taunts that several people yelled at him when he flew by them in the stands. He kept his

eyes searching for the Snitch, also making sure to glance over at the Hufflepuff Seeker at regular intervals in case he found something.

Lee Jordan's commentary, which Harry half-listened to in order to keep track of what was going on, was unbiased this time. That might have been because Gryffindor was not playing. For that, Harry was thankful. He wouldn't have McGonagall's interjections distracting him from hearing what was said.

Slytherin was the first to score. Lee Jordan claimed the Quaffle actually ricocheted off the Hufflepuff Keeper's head before going through the ring he was guarding. Harry wished he'd seen that because he didn't really believe it.

After that, Slytherin scored several more times. Hufflepuff, twenty minutes into the match, began to turn the game around and hold their own. This surprised Harry. They kept the score about two goals apart. Harry began to get nervous again. He needed to find the Snitch fast.

Suddenly, it zipped across his line of vision. Harry turned sharply to the right and launched into a dive after the Snitch.

"Looks like Potter's spotted something!" Lee Jordan announced.

Harry chased after the Snitch as it performed a turning ascension right behind the Slytherin goals. Then something odd happened.

The Nimbus 2000 suddenly jerked to a halt under Harry, short forward, and then halted again. Annoyed and shocked, Harry leaned forward upon the broom in an attempt to get it going again.

It responded by spinning violently so that Harry was hanging on to the broom with his legs and hands wrapped around the handle, rather than leaning on them. That was when Harry realized something was definitely wrong.

The broom shuddered, lurched, and quivered violently as though it were attempting to throw Harry off. Below him, he heard the confused cries of people in the crowd. Some of them seemed concerned that the broom must be a defect. Others cried that it'd been cursed. The rest of them seemed to think Harry had somehow lost control.

Harry had no idea what was happening. Brooms weren't supposed to behave like this.

After a particularly violent lurch, Harry's legs fell away from the broom handle so that he was hanging only by the grip of his hands. Harry looked down at the ground below. He'd surely die if he fell from this height.

Now that Harry was only holding himself up with the strength of his hands, the broom's movements became even wilder. It seemed as though it were desperate to rid itself of Harry.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Madam Hooch flying toward him. She was apparently coming to his aid in case he should fall. All around her, the Quidditch game still went on, but not even Lee Jordan was paying attention to it. Harry felt all eyes on him.

The broom seemed to sense that Madam Hooch was coming to help Harry. It shook so furiously that Harry was worried it would break in two. The shaking jarred the bones in Harry's wrists so violently that it hurt worse than the strain of holding his weight up. Harry felt the muscles in his arms burning. He'd fall any second now. Madam Hooch would not arrive in time. He would die.

One of Harry's hands came loose so that he was only hanging by one arm. The crowd let out a collective, horrified gasp.

Then the broom stopped shaking. Surprised, Harry grabbed it again with his fallen hand. When it did not protest, he tried in vain to swing his leg over the handle. He missed the first time, but managed to hook his ankle around it on the second try.

With a grimace, he pulled himself back on the broom. Some people in the crowd cheered. The palpable tension in the stands instantly evaporated. It was replaced by a collective voicing of relief.

The pain from Harry's wrists vanished as he began his circling again, looking for the Snitch. Harry wondered why his broom had behaved in such a strange way as he searched. He thought that maybe he really had lost control of it.

"Looks like Hufflepuff's Seeker is on to something!" Lee Jordan cried.

Harry's attention immediately shifted to the Hufflepuff Seeker who was in a steep climb at the other end of the pitch. Harry turned and shot toward him, closing the distance in a matter of seconds.

Instantly, he was at the Hufflepuff Seeker's side. They were neck-and-neck, both in hot pursuit of the Snitch.

The crowd roared as the Snitch began a steep dive, straight over the section of stands that held the Slytherins. Harry and the Hufflepuff Seeker rushed to follow it.

Harry noticed the broom that the Hufflepuff Seeker was flying was old and ragged. It was obviously inferior to his Nimbus 2000. Harry smiled as the Seeker reached a hand out to catch the Snitch, but it was too far away, and he had to pull up before he crashed into the stands.

Harry pulled up just above the heads of the Slytherins, level with the Snitch. He could hear the cheers as he zipped past.

Everything seemed to slow down as Harry stretched out his arm, leaned forward on his broom, and wrapped his hand around the tiny, golden, winged Snitch. He let out a cry of victory and lurched to a halt so fast that he actually fell off his broom and into the arms of the Slytherin crowd.

They held up and cheered as he held the Snitch high above his head. Madam Hooch blew the whistle. The game was over.

Harry had won.

After the match, as Harry was being led away by the cheering Slytherins, Snape approached them.

"Congratulations, Potter," said the potion master crisply. He did have a slight smile perched upon his lips. "You managed to not fail miserably."

All Harry could think to reply was, "thanks, sir."

That night, there was a small bit of celebration in the Slytherin common room. It was complete with food someone had stolen from

the kitchens, as well as a couple bottles of firewhisky. Harry didn't partake in the consumption of such things. He was too busy recounting the tale of the game to his housemates, and telling them how he got appointed Seeker in the first place. Pucey didn't even seem so sore about that anymore. Everyone was wildly happy that Harry had saved them from an embarrassing defeat by the Hufflepuffs.

For the very first time in his life, Harry felt accepted.

The rest of November passed in a whirlwind of snow and parchment after the Quidditch game. The third match wasn't scheduled until some time after Christmas, and that, coupled with the biting coldness of the weather, meant far less Quidditch practices. Harry used that time to focus on his studies. Finals were set the week before the Christmas holiday began. They were fast approaching.

Finally, December came. It brought many a snowstorm. By the time finals week arrived, the grounds were covered in a thick quilt of white. It was lovely to look at. The mountains in the distance and the snow coating the trees of the Forbidden Forest in the distance looked especially beautiful. The snow was not so beautiful to venture into, though. It was far too deep, and the temperature was freezing cold outside the castle.

The first final Harry took was Transfiguration. He was reasonably certain he did well on it. At least, he was positive that he passed it. Harry was pretty certain that he aced Defense Against the Dark Arts, and he thought he did well enough in Charms. He was also surprised to find that the Potions final was quite easy for him. Besides Hermione and him, everyone else seemed to have a difficult time. Harry was proud with the knowledge that he'd probably earned an Outstanding grade on the final. At the very least, he must have earned an Exceeds Expectations. He was sure he failed History of Magic because he had no idea how to answer any of the questions. He made almost all of the answers up as he went along so that he could sleep when he was done. He'd actually fallen asleep before he'd finished, however.

Harry found out on the last day of term that both Draco and Blaise were going home for the Christmas holiday. Many other Slytherins seemed to be leaving too, as did much of the student body. Harry found that he was one of the few who would remain at Hogwarts.

Harry heard from some older students saying that the Christmas feast was better than the one they had in Halloween. Harry hoped this was true, and he hoped that he wouldn't miss it because of a troll or something.

On the last day of term before the holiday, they were assigned to study the next few chapters in their potions textbooks by Snape. He was the only teacher who gave them homework over the break. Harry didn't mind. He'd already read two out of three of the chapters Snape wanted them to study.

Unfortunately, Harry had managed to spill some of the potion they'd been assigned to make from his cauldron before leaving. He spent a couple of minutes cleaning it up. As a result, he was the very last to vacate the classroom.

As he stepped out, he thought he heard two people arguing around the corner of the narrow, cold, dungeon corridor. Quietly, Harry crept closer to the edge in order to hear better.

The voices, he immediately discovered, were those of Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger.

"I'm telling you, Ronald, we need to get whatever Fluffy's guarding before he does," said Hermione urgently. "You saw the Quidditch match. You know it's him!"

Ron grunted. "Hermione, I don't think Dumbledore-

"Dumbledore doesn't know! He trusts him. We need to get under that trapdoor before he does."

"How?"

"I don't know...."

"What's it guarding, anyway?"

"I'm not sure, but I know where to start. Hagrid said that what Fluffy is guarding is between Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel. I know I've heard that name before somewhere...."

Ron groaned. "Not more research."

"This is important, Ronald. We need to get it. Of course we're going to research this!"

Harry wondered why Ron and Hermione wanted to steal whatever Fluffy was guarding. Harry was quite sure that it was the package that McGonagall had taken from Gringotts, and therefore it was important. Harry felt angry with Hermione. He should've known. She was just a mudblood Gryffindor. Just because they'd been through that incident with the troll didn't account for anything. It didn't change the fact that she was just another arrogant Gryffindor up to no good. Harry was sure of this. He was definitely going to keep any eye on those two. He'd make sure they didn't get what Fluffy was guarding.

It also sounded as though they were worried someone else would get to it before they did. He wondered who that could be. They'd said something about the Quidditch match. Did they think he was trying to steal the thing under the trap door? Harry wasn't sure. He was definitely going to find out what was going on.

Chapter 11: Christmas

Shortly after the last Potions class of the first term ended, Harry returned to his dorm to deposit all of his supplies. Ron and Hermione were on his mind as he did what little he had to do of the load of homework Snape had given them. Once again, reading ahead paid off for Harry.

All around him, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Blaise, and Draco packed their things. They were leaving tomorrow morning on Christmas Eve. Harry turned in early with his dorm mates that night. Scheming Gryffindors and mysterious plots occupied his dreams. When he woke up, he could remember none of it.

He spent the day of Christmas Eve relaxing and walking around the castle after bidding Draco and Blaise goodbye. He explored some places he'd never been before and occasionally ran into other students who'd chosen to remain at Hogwarts for Christmas. The Slytherins sometimes nodded to him or made a comment about his performance in the Quidditch game nearly a month before. Everyone else basically ignored him.

When it came time for Harry's first real Christmas dinner, he was wholly satisfied from his day without thinking of magic. He'd even dismissed Ron and Hermione from his mind.

Harry entered the Great Hall to find that the four house tables were gone, and the platform that had once held the staff table was empty. Instead, the floor of the Hall was occupied by one table running the length of the room as the house tables had. It was connected at the far end to another table which ran nearly the width of the Hall. Together, the two tables formed a large T.

Above them floated a thousand glowing candles. Behind them, on the staff platform, stood the biggest Christmas tree Harry had ever seen, decked out in all manner of ornaments and tinsel. Upon the tables, the forks, spoons, knives, plates, goblets, and platters were all made of solid, sterling silver, some were made of gold as well.

Most of the teachers were seated at the horizontally oriented table at the end of the T. The students that remained in Hogwarts were currently filling up the vertically oriented table. Most of them took seats as far away from the staff as possible. Harry did the opposite.

He had no desire to mingle with them. He took as seat as close as possible to the staff table.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," said Dumbledore to him.

"Thank you, sir."

"A fine Quidditch game, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I never got the chance to congratulate you."

Harry gave his thanks again as the rest of the students filled the table. In the end, when everyone was seated, the entire table wasn't even full. Harry felt quite comfortable with where he was. The remaining Slytherins sat near him.

Once they were all seated, Dumbledore stood.

"A very merry Christmas to all of you students who chose to remain at Hogwarts for your holiday," said Dumbledore. "As you can see, we have joined two tables together in order to facilitate peaceful, cooperative, loving unity, which, after all, is a main theme of the Christmas holiday. Now, I have but one thing left to say: tuck in."

The food appeared in an instant. Harry had never seen such a delicious assortment of food, much less partook in a Christmas dinner of any kind. A hundred, fat, juicy, plump hams and turkeys occupied the gold and silver platters. There were piles of roast potatoes; boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce; tureens of buttered peas, and platters of chipolatas. There was also much, much more.

At regular intervals upon the table were also piles of wizard crackers. They were nothing like the feeble, Muggle party crackers made of paper that simply released a flurry of confetti and occasionally a little, plastic toy. When wizard crackers sounded off they produced an explosion like a cannon, and all manner of things popped out of them.

Harry pulled a wizard cracker at the same time as Dumbledore. He got, of all things, a starry wizard's cap and a live rabbit which promptly hopped away. Dumbledore's wizard cracker produced a flowered bonnet which he traded for his hat.

Harry tried to hear as Professor Flitwick whispered a joke to Hagrid who laughed heartily.

Wonderful Christmas puddings followed the turkey, and Harry nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle he was shocked to find embedded in his. He pocketed it and ate away.

Harry watched as several staff members, including McGonagall and Hagrid, continued to call for more and more wine. He also watched as the Weasley twins, Fred and George, down near the end of the table, stood up and began to belt out Christmas carols of all sorts.

Dumbledore hummed along with them and occasionally conducted them with his wand which produced tiny little bolts of red and green lightning as he waved it.

Harry saw Ron and Hermione arguing near the end of the feast. It looked as though Hermione was quite keen on something, but Ron did not share her enthusiasm. Harry wished he would've sat closer to them so he could have heard what they were saying.

When the feast was over, Dumbledore wished them a happy Christmas and bade them all good night. Harry, truthfully, was too tired to really even consider exercising the effort to get close to Ron and Hermione on the way out to see if he could discern anything. He made his way back to the common room with his few fellow Slytherins and promptly descended the stairs to his dormitory. It was nice to be alone in it for a change.

Harry fell asleep quickly.

When he awoke, he was so shocked to find a small pile of presents at the foot of his bed that he nearly called out to Draco or Blaise to ensure they were meant for him. Of course, no one else was in the dormitory, so Harry reasoned that they must, indeed, be his presents.

Never in his entire life had Harry received a proper Christmas gift. Every year, the Dursleys always provided him with something. Once, it'd been an old pair of Uncle Vernon's socks, another time, it'd been a piece of coal.

These presents were the real thing. They were wrapped in a variety of colors. Harry seized the first one and read the card attached. It was from Blaise. Harry opened the wrapping paper to find a box filled with an assortment of sweets Harry had never seen before. Blaise's card said that they were sweets of the wizarding world, and, since Harry hadn't seen much of it yet, Blaise figured he'd enjoy these. Harry popped a chocolate sweet into his mouth as he grabbed his next present.

He was surprised to see that it was from the Dursleys, though it seemed only to be a card.

It was, but it had a fifty pence piece inside.

The card read: We received your message and have enclosed your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia.

Harry wondered what message they were referring to. He supposed someone at Hogwarts, perhaps Dumbledore, had sent them a letter ordering them to give Harry a Christmas present. After all, despite the fact that Dumbledore seemed to be clinically insane, he always had a sort of timeless look in his eyes, as though he knew more than he let on. Harry wondered if he sent the Dursleys the order. Though, Harry could not imagine Uncle Vernon being intimidated by what would have undoubtedly been a polite request from the headmaster. Maybe it'd been McGonagall or even Snape. Those two were much more imposing, Harry thought. He dismissed the ideas, pocketed the fifty pence piece, figuring it might be useful in the Muggle world again sometime, and picked up his third present.

He was surprised to see this one was actually directly from Snape.

Attached to the parcel was a card. Harry opened it and read.

Potter,

It seems you will be required to serve as the Slytherin Seeker for the time being. I've taken this opportunity to provide you with a practical tool. Inside this parcel, you will find a broomstick cleaning kit. Use accordingly. I will not have any member of my house team riding an unkempt broom.

Professor Snape

Harry opened the parcel and found the broomstick cleaning kit. He was pleasantly surprised to find that he'd received a gift from the potions master, although he was sure Snape saw it as more of a necessity. That was probably why he hadn't even said 'Merry Christmas' on the card. He hadn't even used the word 'gift'.

Harry set the kit aside and moved to his last present. This one was definitely some sort of article of clothing because the parcel was soft and malleable. Harry tore it open, and a long length of silvery fabric slid on to the covers of his bed. Harry held it up. A tiny piece of parchment fell from its folds.

Harry picked it up and read the note upon it. It was written in narrow, loopy handwriting that Harry never seen before.

Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature.

Confused, Harry stretched the silvery fabric out and found that it was actually a garment. In fact, it was a cloak.

Harry stepped out of bed and draped his father's silvery cloak about himself.

When he looked down to see how it fit him, he was surprised to see he had no body at all.

Shocked, Harry opened the cloak and reappeared. He wrapped it around himself again and his body vanished.

Another useful gift, Harry thought. The cloak was obviously bewitched to make a person invisible. Harry pulled it over his head and found that the material it was made out of was so fine, he could see through it. He walked over to the mirror in the dorm room and looked into it. He saw nothing.

Harry dropped the cloak, letting it fall to the ground. His reflection appeared before his eyes.

That morning, Harry made his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast with the invisibility cloak in his trouser pocket. The material it was made of was so fine and lightweight that it could be folded until it was incredibly small. It seemed no bigger than a wallet to Harry.

Breakfast wasn't exactly a feast for Harry. The tables had all been returned to normal and the food was the normal breakfast menu. Harry didn't eat much. He'd gorged himself pretty well last night, and his stomach wasn't really eager to have more food packed into it.

Across the Great Hall, Harry watched Hermione lecture Ron as he fussed with a large, hand-knit, maroon sweater. There was a large letter R sewn in to it. Harry thought it looked a bit foolish, but also quite warm.

Ron, from the look on his face, did not want to listen to whatever Hermione had to say. Harry's eyes narrowed. They were talking about Fluffy and the trap door again. It wasn't difficult to guess.

Harry remained at breakfast as long as he might have since he wasn't so hungry. He got up at the same time as Ron and Hermione and trailed behind them a ways as they exited the Great Hall.

Upon reaching the Entrance Hall, they turned to take one of the ornate stairways that led in to the upper floors of the castle. Harry paused at the side of the staircase, partially hidden in shadow. He glanced around to make sure nobody else was lurking about, and then pulled out the invisibility cloak. He thought this the perfect time to test its usefulness.

Harry threw it over his shoulders and head. Satisfied that it was covering every inch of him, he moved quickly to follow Ron and Hermione.

He caught up with them near the Grand Staircase. He approached them so that he was close enough to hear their words, and tailed at that distance. Luckily, they didn't have to be silent since they thought no one else was around. Harry made sure to keep his footsteps silent. He wasn't sure if the cloak also concealed noise or not. Now was not the appropriate time to test it, of course.

"I don't care if it's Christmas, Ronald," Hermione snapped. "This is important!"

Harry followed them up the first of the shifting staircases as they spoke.

"C'mon, Hermione. We've already spent enough time looking for Flamel. I'm getting sick of the library."

"Since we've found nothing, we've not spent nearly enough time. We're going to the library today."

Ron groaned. "When?"

"Right after I finish the Potions homework that Professor Snape assigned us. You'd do well to finish yours too."

"Bloody hell! It's Christmas Day, Hermione!"

"So?"

Ron grumbled something unintelligible and then fell silent.

They didn't look as though they were going to speak much anymore. Harry followed them all the way to the seventh floor and they remained wordless.

All the while, he considered the name Flamel. Harry remembered the full name was Nicholas Flamel. That name sounded familiar to him. He couldn't remember why. He'd definitely heard it before.

He turned back as Ron and Hermione entered the seventh floor corridor. It was his intention to get to the library before they did. He was going to remain under the cloak, though. He couldn't really think of a good excuse for his being there since they had no pending reports in any classes. He intended to look for this Flamel himself while he watched Ron and Hermione to see if they found anything.

He didn't know what Nicholas Flamel had to do with whatever Fluffy was guarding, but it was apparently essential. Ron and Hermione wanted to steal the thing. He wanted to know why and he wanted to stop it.

He spent the rest of the day skulking around the library, searching for books that Ron and Hermione had missed that might provide a lead on Nicholas Flamel.

All the while, he kept an ear open to listen to them talk. If they found anything, he was sure he'd hear.

Harry repeated this ritual almost every day for the rest of the holiday. Ron was not so keen on researching Flamel. He hadn't been from the start. Harry was beginning to agree with him. In all the books he'd looked through, he'd found nothing. Neither had Ron and Hermione.

On a Friday, near the end of the day, he heard Hermione slam a book down.

Harry quickly ran out from behind the shelves, covered by his father's invisibility cloak, in order to get a look at what they were doing. He saw Madam Pince, the librarian, walk by and glare at Hermione for producing such a loud noise and abusing a book.

"We've been looking for ages!" Hermione snapped when Madam Pince was out of earshot.

"I know," said Ron. "Let's stop."

"No!" said Hermione venomously. "Listen... the only place we haven't looked is the restricted section."

"I suppose. But how do you think we're going to get in there?"

"We have to have permission from a teacher. I think I might be able to convince Flitwick or McGonagall.... I'll try it tomorrow."

Ron groaned in protest. "Tomorrow? Hermione, we've been at it for weeks!"

"I know," Hermione snapped. "This is important. We need to figure out what it is Fluffy is guarding and get it before Snape does."

Ron sighed and concurred, but Harry did not hear what he said.

Snape.

Hermione was worried about Snape trying to steal what Fluffy was guarding. Harry checked to make sure the cloak was still covering him. He thought they must've said Snape for his benefit.

Harry had no idea how they'd come up with that harebrained idea. What would Snape want with a package from Gringotts? Harry couldn't think of any motive he might have. He immediately came up with a theory. It was obvious that Ron was an unwilling participant, and this was Hermione's scheme. She was just using Snape to justify whatever she was doing for Ron's sake.

Harry needed to find out what Fluffy was guarding before she did, and he had to stop her.

He was going to go the restricted section, under the cloak, tonight.

Chapter 12: The Mirror of Erised

It was only logical that people stayed up later in the night when they didn't have to wake up early. Harry was getting sick of reading about complex Potions as he sat in the closest armchair to the door in the Slytherin common room. Why couldn't his housemates simply go to bed? It wasn't as though there was much to do, and nothing very interesting had happened over the past few days to merit such long conversation. Harry had very important things to do tonight. They involved breaking school rules, and thus, he could not have what was left of the Slytherin House in the common room watch him sneak out to go mull over books in the library's restricted section.

Finally, after the last two chattering girls left the common room, Harry closed his potions book and set it aside. He made a quick glance around the common room to ensure that no one was still loitering before he pulled the invisibility cloak from his pocket. Positive that no one was around to see it, he draped the cloak around himself.

Silently and quietly, he left the common room and trekked through the narrow, dark, cold, dank passages of the dungeon. He ran into no opposition.

He passed the Gryffindor Ghost, Nearly Headless Nick, on his way through the Entrance Hall.

After a short time of traversing the halls as stealthily as possible, hidden by the invisibility cloak, Harry reached the library. When he opened the door to enter it, it squeaked loudly. The piercing sound in the darkness made him jump. He glanced around, wary of Filch.

A few moments passed in total silence. Harry thought there must not have been anyone around to hear it, so he stepped into the library.

He weaved through the tables in the center aisle between the shelves, all of which were spotless thanks to Madam Pince's obsessive care-taking. He reached the very back of the library. He strode up to the little gate that separated the restricted area from the rest of the books and turned the lock. There was a loud, echoing click as the bolt disengaged. The sound made Harry jump like the sound of the squeaking door had. Once again he glanced around for any sign of trouble.

Nothing.

Harry opened the gate. The hinges groaned in protest, and the sound of iron grinding against iron echoed in the otherwise total silence. Harry cursed the noise under his breath, but it seemed, like all the other noises, to attract no attention.

Harry stepped into the restricted section but did not shut the gate behind him in fear that his luck would run out and the sound would alert someone.

Harry made his way toward one of the shelves and glanced at the titles of the books. None of them looked very promising and he thought most of them must have to do with dark magic. Finally, Harry found a title that looked like it could possibly contain some sort or reference to Nicholas Flamel. It was about dark wizards. No one ever said Nicholas Flamel was a good guy, Harry thought. In any case, it was worth a try.

Harry opened the cloak enough to allow his hand through, snatched the book from the shelf, and brought it back under the cloak. He smiled to himself at the thought of Filch walking in to see a disembodied hand floating in the air. He supposed it would be quite amusing to see Filch's reaction.

Harry sat down on the floor in between shelves and drew his wand.

"Lumos!" Harry hissed in the darkness.

The tip of his wand immediately lit up. He didn't know whether the light would show through the invisibility cloak or not, but if it did, there was really no way to conceal it. This was a risk he'd have to take.

Harry stuck, his wand in one hand, used his other hand to slowly open the cover of the book in his lap. As soon as he did, a horrifying, blood-curdling scream erupted, seemingly from the very pages of the book itself. Harry started at the noise, and was so gripped by shock that it took him a second to gather his wits and close the book.

Hastily, he extinguished his wand, and set that book back on the shelves. He stood there for a moment, waiting. No one entered the library.

When he was satisfied that no one was around to hear the scream, he resumed his search. He scanned book titles for a half an hour. None of them had anything to do with witches or wizards, famous or otherwise. All of them were about some sort of dark magical theory. The titles grew increasingly more gruesome as Harry went along. He was quite sure that one was a guidebook on torture. It was even stained in what looked like blood. Harry wondered why such books were even allowed in a school.

Finally, he spied another one that looked as if it might possibly contain information about Nicholas Flamel.

He had to stretch up to grab it, because it was placed quite high up. When he finally got hold of it, he brought it under his cloak, sat down on the ground, and lit the tip of his wand once more. He braced himself for a scream or some other blaring noise, and then opened the book quickly. Nothing happened.

Harry scanned the table of contents, the edges of which looked to be burnt. The book was about various dark wizards that had revolutionized dark magic. Harry went through the pages, glancing at the headings which were all the names of wizards. He found absolutely nothing.

Frustrated, Harry slammed the book closed and was just about to put it back in its proper place when something brushed against his leg.

Harry started again and lost hold of the book. It fell to the wooden floor with a massive boom. The noise sent the cat at his feet flying. Harry groaned in dismay as he watched it disappear into the library. It was Mrs. Norris, Filch's pet cat.

Harry could have sworn that thing was an Animagus like McGonagall. Harry had learned early on in Transfiguration about Animagi. They were witches or wizards that had mastered the complex art of morphing into animals at will. This was different from a witch or wizard that simply transfigured themselves into an animal—in that case, the witch or wizard in question would become the animal and would require someone to change them back. Mrs.

Norris just seemed too smart to be just a simple animal. Harry was sure she was on her way to Filch right now.

Harry picked the book up, hastily shoved it in between two others on the shelf, extinguished his wand, pocketed it, and then quickly exited the restricted section. As he was closing the gate, the gruff voice of Filch sounded in the library.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," he called.

Harry turned to see him near the entrance to the library, clutching a lantern. Mrs. Norris stood at his feat.

"You'll be in much more trouble if I have to come in here and catch you," Filch said in what was probably supposed to be a reassuring, but coaxing voice.

Harry could hear the treat underneath.

He immediately turned and walked between two shelves of books so that he could sneak along the wall.

As he did, Filch stepped further into the library and began a chaotic, disorganized search. He shone his lantern in the spaces between bookshelves and crouched to look under tables, all the while Harry moved closer to the door, keeping to the shadows. Filch would not be able to see him under the invisibility cloak, but it was always good to be cautious. One could never be too careful, Harry thought.

Mrs. Norris suddenly stepped in to his path and nearly tripped him. He stopped cold, an inch or two away from her.

Her eyes bored straight into his, as though she could see through the cloak.

She meowed loudly.

"What is it, my sweet?" cried Filch from the other end of the library. "Found something, did you?"

Harry gritted his teeth in annoyance. He gave the cat a light kick in the ribs, shoving her out of his way. She hissed in protest and

followed him as he made a faster trek for the door. Mrs. Norris kept right in his wake, trailing him closely.

Harry knew a spell called the full Body-Bind Curse that would probably stop the cat in its tracks. He didn't want to risk voicing the incantation, though. Filch would definitely hear it, and, as of now, Harry knew that Filch had really no evidence to suggest that anyone was actually in the library. After all, Mrs. Norris was just a cat-albeit a smart one. Nevertheless, her meow was not proof.

Harry quickened his pace and practically sprinted out into the corridor. He looked back to find Mrs. Norris still on his heels.

Now becoming desperate, Harry seized the handle to the nearest door and pulled it open. He stepped in quickly and shut it behind him.

Still facing the closed door, Harry took a few steps back. He could hear Mrs. Norris meowing outside. Harry waited for a moment. Sure enough, he heard Filch bounding down the corridor. The caretaker stopped at the door and opened it. Harry couldn't help but jump as Filch's face poked around the door and the caretaker's eyes gazed right through the spot Harry was standing.

"There's no one in here, my pet," said Filch. "C'mon. Let's go have a look in the first floor corridor."

Filch closed the door with a loud slam. Harry waited, listening as the caretaker and his cat walked down the corridor.

Harry didn't move until Filch's footsteps had long since faded away.

Once he was quite sure that Filch was really gone, Harry turned to glance at the room he was in.

He immediately noticed that it was an empty classroom, because of the old desks piled near the corner, but then he saw something strange.

A large, ornate, gold-framed mirror, tall as the classroom ceiling, stood on two clawed feet at the far end of the room. Harry wasn't sure what it was, but something drew him toward the mirror.

He strode the length of the classroom and stepped up to it to get a good look. There was a rather large inscription near the top. Harry, figuring it was safe, drew his wand, and extended it outside the cloak.

"Lumos!" he said.

The glow from the tip of his wand provided him enough light to see the inscription.

It read: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi".

Harry had never seen such a language before. He wondered what it meant.

Figuring it was safe, Harry decided to take off his cloak so that he could raise his wand in a better position to see if there was any more to the inscription. He glance behind himself to see the empty classroom and shrugged his cloak to the floor.

When he turned his head toward the mirror, he had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming. In the glass, he saw his reflection. Behind him stood two robed figures.

Slowly, Harry turned around to face what had to be two professors. He would have to accept his punishment now that he'd been caught.

But there was nothing behind him.

Harry turned back to see the reflection in the mirror again. Indeed, he he could still see himself. His face was pale from fear, and behind him stood two figures. Harry stepped closer to the mirror to get a better look at them.

One was a woman, she was smiling and waving at him. Harry reached his hand behind himself to grasp her hand. Their reflections were so close together. He felt only air.

The woman must exist only in the mirror, he thought.

A man stood at the woman's side behind Harry. He was smiling too. Like Harry, he had messy, jet black hair and wore a pair of glasses

with round frames. Harry gaped at the resemblance. The woman at his side had long, red hair, and her eyes....

They were like his eyes.

Harry swallowed.

"Mum?" he whispered.

The woman smiled and nodded.

"Dad?" Harry inquired of the man.

He nodded as well.

Harry's face was nearly against the glass now. His hands were pressed upon it. He stared, transfixed, at the reflections of his parents. They smiled back at him and did not fade.

How long he stood there, gazing, Harry did not know.

It must have been a good, long time later that Harry realized he could hardly keep his eyes open.

"I'll be back again," Harry whispered to his parents.

They waved goodbye to him before he turned to leave.

Harry felt tears at the brims of his eyes. He didn't want to go. Throughout his whole childhood with the Dursleys, all he'd ever longed for was the loving care of his parents. Sometimes he'd dreamed that they would come and take him away from his vile aunt and uncle, but they were dead, and so they never did. Harry did not want to leave them now, but he couldn't help it. He promised himself that he would come back tomorrow, maybe even during the day if he had to.

Harry turned to have one last look at his parents. They were still waving. He waved back, threw his father's cloak over himself again, and returned as quickly as possible to the Slytherin common room.

Though he could barely keep his eyes open, he did not drift off to sleep quickly. He lay there in his bed for along time, watching the

images of his parents that had been ingrained in his mind. He thought of them until he finally fell asleep.

He awoke very late the next day. It was nearly eleven o'clock in the morning.

Excited, Harry threw on some fresh robes, pocketed the invisibility cloak, and practically ran out of the common room. He quickly made his way back to the empty classroom. The corridor outside was deserted. Satisfied no one would see him, Harry entered the room again and ran to the mirror.

His parents were there again. They stood smiling lovingly at him.

Harry didn't know how long he stood there. Long enough that his feet got tired, so he had to sit down. Long enough that the sun began to set.

Finally, the hunger gnawing inside Harry for missing breakfast and lunch became too much. He ventured down to the Great Hall to get a quick bite to eat. After that, he returned immediately to the empty classroom with the mirror.

He stood there, with the reflections of his parents, for a very long time; far into the night.

When he became too tired, he left.

Over the next week, their last days of the Christmas holiday, Harry spent his time gazing into the mirror and watching his parents. Sometimes he skipped meals because of it. He always stood there, gazing late into the night before he finally went to sleep.

It was a shock to see Draco and Blaise in the Great Hall for dinner on Friday. They had returned for the beginning of term which would resume on Monday. Harry didn't pay much attention as they discussed what had happened over their breaks. He was irritated because he had to revise his plans now.

When they were finished eating, they returned to the common room and had a long chat there. Harry occasionally mingled with some other Slytherins about their holidays, but their words didn't register in

Harry's mind. They went in one ear and out the other without leaving any trace of meaning behind.

Finally, it came time for bed. Harry grudgingly followed Draco and Blaise down to the dorm and pretended to lie down and go to sleep.

He waited for an hour in maddening anxiety before he was sure that it was all right to leave.

Harry threw on the invisibility cloak and left the common room as quickly as stealth would allow. He made his way back to the empty classroom.

Upon entering, he threw off his cloak, rushed to the mirror, and sat down to watch the reflections of his parents.

He gazed at them, perhaps for an hour, before he was interrupted.

A voice behind him made him jump.

"Back again, Harry?"

Harry jumped to his feet and spun to face Professor Dumbledore.

The headmaster approached him from the shadows.

"Sir," said Harry, "I didn't mean—I never saw you, sir...."

"Indeed. You see, Harry, I do not need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore. He was smiling.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"I see," Dumbledore continued, "that you, like many others before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, sir."

"No, but I suppose you now know what it does?"

"It shows me my parents."

"Ah, does it? Well, perhaps you've developed a theory as to why that is?"

"Does it... does it show the dead, sir?"

"Not necessarily. Think, Harry; look deep down inside. Ask yourself why it is you see your parents when you look in the mirror...."

Harry thought long and hard. Dumbledore remained silent as he did so. In the end, Harry came up with nothing.

"I don't know, sir," Harry said.

"I'll give you a hint. The happiest man in the world would look in to the mirror and see only himself."

"So..." Harry began, "it shows us what we want? Whatever we want?"

"Almost. Perhaps it would also help to know that the word 'Erised' is 'desire' spelled backwards?"

"Oh," said Harry, running through the letters in his mind. It was 'desired' spelled backwards. Harry wondered how he'd never noticed that before.

"So, it shows us whatever it is we desire most in the world?"

"Yes, but it is, perhaps, a tad bit more specific than that. What the mirror shows, Harry, is our heart's deepest, most desperate desires. You see your parents because you have never known them. You grew up under the rather... neglectful care of your aunt and uncle. You've always longed for the love of your parents. Therefore, you see them staring back at you when you look in the mirror.

"But this mirror can be very dangerous, Harry. It gives us neither knowledge nor truth. Men have wasted away in front of it. It does not do to dwell on dreams and desires, Harry. That is why, tomorrow, the Mirror of Erised will be moved to a new home. I must ask you not to go looking for it again. If you should happen across it, however, you will be prepared. Now, it is quite late. Bed time, I think."

"Excuse me, sir, can I ask you one more thing?"

"Well, I believe you just did," said Dumbledore with a smile. "You may ask me something else if you wish."

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"What do I see? Well, I see myself holding a nice pair of socks. One can never have too many socks."

"Right..." said Harry.

"Now, off to bed," said Dumbledore.

"Good night, sir."

"By the way, the penchant Slytherins seem to have for skulking about is against the rules, at least at night," Dumbledore admonished. "I suggest that you refrain from further midnight ventures, Harry. Eventually, you're bound to slip up, even with that fine cloak of yours. I'm sure you know that Professor Snape does not take kindly to his students breaking the rules."

"Right, sir," said Harry. Although he thought Dumbledore ought to amend his last sentence. Snape didn't take kindly to his students breaking the rules and getting caught.

"Good night," said Dumbledore.

"Good night."

Harry stole one quick glance back at his parents because he couldn't help himself. Then he walked to the door, put on the cloak, and made his way back to the Slytherin common room.

He hopped into bed thinking about what Dumbledore had said about wasting away. That was very true.... Harry had missed a lot of opportunities to watch Ron and Hermione. He'd have to catch up tomorrow.

Harry finally fell asleep after pondering Dumbledore's sanity. The man's deepest, most desperate desire was to have more socks?

Believe it or not, I actually had a whole other scene and montage of spying plotted for this chapter, but then I realized that it is so complete on its own that I don't need to do that. I was worried I wouldn't be able to support a full chapter on the Mirror of Erised, but I did! Anyway, I'll save the spying for the next chapter. All we've really got left is the climax, people. This thing is winding down.... By the way, this fic has 72 reviews. In my four years of writing fanfiction, I've never gotten that many. It also has about 7,400 hits, 47 (that's my favorite number!) people have favorited it, and a whopping 90 people have it on alerts thus far. Thank you all so much for reading!

Chapter 13: The Philosopher's Stone

Now that Harry was no longer spending his time in front of the Mirror of Erised, he was able to focus more of his time on scouring books for Nicholas Flamel and spying on Ron and Hermione as they attempted to do the same thing. Harry no longer had to wear the invisibility cloak in the library as he spied on Ron and Hermione. The place was always full now, therefore he was able to blend in with the crowd and look as if though he was just studying for classes.

Now, however, the search for Flamel was slow going because Harry was actually studying for classes. Term had resumed after the Christmas holiday in full force, and Harry really had to battle to keep ahead while also keeping track of the two meddlesome Gryffindors. It was a difficult balance that grew increasingly more frustrating. Harry was sure he'd looked through every book that might possibly have something to do with Flamel at least one time. Ron and Hermione definitely had as well and Harry had been keeping a sharp eye on them. Their efforts, so far, had amounted to nothing.

Harry was growing angry with the entire situation. It was Ron and Hermione's fault he had to do this. Hermione was probably primarily to blame. Once, Harry had considered going to Snape, but then remembered all the times Snape had snidely insinuated that Harry needed to do things himself, and Snape did not appreciate his students running to teachers to whine. No, if it was anyone's job to put at stop to whatever it was Hermione was doing, it would be Harry. He knew about it. He would fix the problem. That was probably what Snape would tell him anyway.

Harry had noticed that Draco and Blaise seemed to be suspicious of him. Once, they had asked why he spent so much time in the library. He didn't really think they bought his excuse about extra studying, especially not Draco.

One night at dinner, sometime in the beginning of February (Harry was never sure what the date was because of all the studying he was doing), Draco and Blaise finally voiced their questions so that Harry couldn't really avoid them.

"Listen, Potter," said Draco. "You're up to something. I know you are. You're going to the library too much. You're starting to remind me of

that mudblood Granger. In fact, every time you're in the library, she is too."

Harry was taken aback by this. He wondered if he was really so obvious or if Draco was just obsessed. Harry certainly hoped it was the latter.

"Yeah, you're going to the library way too much, Potter," Blaise agreed. "I'm not blind either. What are you doing?"

Harry shook his head and glanced automatically toward where Hermione sat on the other end of the Hall. He weighed the pros and cons quickly in his mind. He couldn't really see a reason not to tell Draco and Blaise. After all, they'd both kept the secret about his being appointed to the Slytherin Quidditch team. This was just as secret, if not more. It was also very important. Harry was sure of it. If he told them, perhaps they could help him. He was certainly sick of spying all on his own.

So, he began to tell them the story. He spoke quietly so that no one at the table would overhear. He began with the troll incident at Halloween. He told them, for the first time, about the three-headed dog called Fluffy in the third floor corridor.

"You mean a Cerberus?" Blaise interrupted after Harry told them about Fluffy.

"A what?" Harry asked.

Draco looked at Blaise with raised eyebrows.

"A Cerberus," said Blaise. "Greek Mythology. A three headed dog that guarded the entrance to the underworld, pretty much. I expect this Fluffy is a Cerberus."

"Never heard of that before," said Harry with a shrug. "I suppose it could be one."

"I think so. My mum likes mythology."

After Blaise's interjection about the Cerberus, Harry continued on with the tale. He told them of the trap door that Fluffy stood on, and that he was sure it was guarding something. Dumbledore had, of

course, confirmed this. Harry then told them about what he'd heard Hermione say about getting whatever Fluffy was guarding. He told them both what he thought. They listened quite attentively.

Harry then told them his theory that Ron was a pawn in Hermione's plot to steal whatever Fluffy was guarding. He told them how Hermione had told Ron that Snape was actually the person trying to steal it. Like Harry, neither Draco nor Blaise believed such a thing. Draco provided sound reasoning that Harry couldn't deny in order to cement it. Draco brought up the fact Snape was a Hogwarts professor, and he probably knew exactly how to get to whatever Fluffy was guarding. Or, in the very least, he would've figured out how to do it a long time ago and done it. Plus, he was the head of their house. They could never fathom him going against Dumbledore's wishes. Sure, Snape could be cruel, even to his own students sometimes, but he wasn't a thief. There was no reason for him to want what was under the trap door.

Hermione was an entirely different story. None of them could come up with a reason as to why she would want something Dumbledore was guarding. They all agreed with what Draco said. He reasoned that she was a mudblood and she was no different from every other mudblood, blood traitor, or Gryffindor, for that matter. They were all arrogant, overconfident, egotistical troublemakers. Most of them were stupid, though; that's why they never amounted to anything. Hermione was smart. She must want whatever it was Dumbledore had hidden. Maybe she believed she could study it or something. That would fit her perfectly. Harry, Draco and Blaise could not come up with a motive that really made sense for Hermione. All they knew was that she definitely wanted to get whatever the dog was guarding, and they were going to stop her.

Draco and Blaise both agreed to help Harry keep an eye on Ron and Hermione.

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Harry found it easier to keep track of Hermione and Ron with Draco and Blaise. They all took shifts spying whenever Ron or Hermione was in the library. It was a very useful thing and it allowed the others to keep up with their school work.

This was especially convenient for Harry. It was now mid April and the finals were little more than a month away. On top of that, the last Quidditch game before the match for the Hogwart's Quidditch Cup was fast approaching. Harry found out from Snape that it had been decided he would remain Seeker for the rest of the Quidditch season. Next year, he would try out again for the spot against whoever wanted to vie for it. Slytherin was to play Ravenclaw on the last Saturday before May. Gryffindor was to play Hufflepuff on the second-to-last Saturday of May. The winner of both matches would play for the Cup. Flint was determined to win.

This meant more Quidditch practice for Harry which severely impeded his study time. Without Blaise and Draco to help watch Ron and Hermione, he couldn't have managed to do everything. Even Ron and Hermione were taking turns researching for Flamel. They were now looking through books that really had little to do with wizards.

The day of the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff game came and went. Gryffindor won, crushing the badgers like the weaklings they were.

The pressure was on for Harry to help the Slytherins win against the Ravenclaws so that they would advance to the championship and win it after one final match against Gryffindor.

The day of the match, Harry made his way up to breakfast slightly late. He'd been up a bit too late the night before in order to keep up with Transfiguration.

The anxiety that gripped him today was as severe as it had been the day of his very first match. When Harry took his seat next to Blaise in the Great Hall, he wasn't in the mood for eating, and apparently, neither were most of the teachers. Several of them were missing, including Snape. The pressure of the game was weighing on his mind. He couldn't imagine what would happen if Slytherin lost. It would be terrible, and Harry had a really bad feeling that all the ire would be directed at him.

"It's about bloody time, Potter," snapped Draco as Harry sat down.

Harry felt like retorting, but his nervousness was too severe.

"What?" he mumbled instead.

"Listen, your talk about the Gryffindors being up to no good got me thinking, and then when I remembered this Quidditch match, I thought about what happened in your first match. Remember when you lost control of your broom?"

"I didn't lose control," Harry said, a bit of irritation creeping into his voice. "I told everyone that. I don't know what happened."

"Well, I do. When I was watching the mudblood and Weasley, I took the time to do a bit of research on my own."

"How'd you manage that when you had to study for class and keep looking for Flamel?" Harry asked.

Draco fixed him with a look that made Harry feel as though he was missing something.

"I didn't. I was researching hexes, not Flamel. I thought we should let Weasley and the mudblood do that."

"Why were you researching hexes?" Harry asked. Initially, he'd felt a bit of anger at Draco's words. But his reasoning was sound. After all, if Ron and Hermione were already researching Flamel, there was no hurt in taking a break from it to do something else. As long as someone was keeping an eye on them, it couldn't hurt.

"Because, Potter, I know you didn't lose control of your broom. When you were talking about the Gryffindors getting into trouble, I thought about what happened in that match. I saw you catch the Snitch, Potter. You're not a novice flier. You know what you're doing. I've flown a few times myself, and for a broom to do what yours did is not normal. Your broom was being hexed, Potter. I'm sure of it."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Harry snapped.

"I... forgot," Draco admitted.

Harry glared at him.

Draco sneered. "Don't give me that, Potter. You know as well as I do that it's pretty bloody easy to forget things while doing what we're doing. Remember how Blaise almost forgot his robes last Tuesday?"

Blaise glared angrily at Draco, his cheeks turning red. Draco laughed. Harry shook his head. He was not amused.

"I nearly fell off my broom," said Harry. "I could have died!"

"I know, Potter. I told you, didn't I?"

"On the day of the game!"

"Look, the point is, I told you. Someone might try it again. You need to take this to Professor Snape."

"Why Snape?"

"Because he's the head of our house; he knows a thing or two about Dark Magic, a damn lot more than Quirrel. If there's a counter curse, he'll know."

"Do you think I'll need a counter curse?"

"I don't know, Potter, but if I were you, I'd rather be safe than sorry. Anyway, whoever was cursing your broom has a chance to do it again, since they did it the last game. They might try it again. Potter, if you die, we'll lose."

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco's concern. "You should have told me earlier."

"I forgot, Potter. It could happen to anyone."

Harry stood up. "I should go see Snape now. I'll be late if I don't."

"Go," Blaise agreed. "Even if Snape can't teach you the counter curse, maybe he can look out for the guy who cursed you the last time, in case they try to do it again."

"D'you reckon it was a Gryffindor?" Harry asked.

"No idea," said Draco. "Personally, I don't think the Gryffindors, bold as they are,-" Draco scowled at the words "—would try to kill you."

"You're probably right," Harry agreed. "I'm going to go see Snape."

"Good," said Malfoy.

Harry stood up and strode quickly toward the doors of the Hall.

"You'd better win for us, too, Potter!" Draco called from behind him.

He heard several of the Slytherins at the table cheer. An arm reached out from the cluster of bodies at the table and seized Harry's wrist.

It was Flint.

"Where are you going, Potter?" the captain demanded.

"I need to see Snape for something," Harry said.

Flint let him go. "Don't be late, or I swear it, Potter, you'll-"

"I won't be," said Harry. In his mind he added: "So long as you let me leave."

Harry exited the Great Hall, made his way across the Entrance Hall, and descended down into the dungeons. It took him a minute or two before he reached the Potions classroom. The door was closed. He hoped Snape would be in there. Harry knocked twice and paused to wait for a reply. None came.

Harry reasoned that, perhaps, Snape was in his office. He opened the door to the Potions classroom and stepped inside. It was almost entirely dark, and Harry could, indeed, hear sounds emanating from behind the closed door of Snape's office which was attached to the classroom.

Harry approached it, and the sounds became clearer. They were voices. It sounded like the people behind the door were having an argument or one was at least scolding the other. It sounded quite severe.

Harry pressed his ear to the door to hear clearly.

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrel," said Snape in an unmistakeably threatening manner.

"I-I... S-Severus, you c-can't possibly believe that I-"

"What I believe is that you most certainly know something about it. You are quite talented at Occlumency, Quirrel; I will give you that. I cannot seem to discover what it is you're hiding. Dumbledore trusts you, but I am not so easily duped. You know something... don't you?" There was a pause and Quirrel gasped.

"S-Severus, p-please. I have n-no idea what y-you're t-talking about."

"Do not lie to me, Quirrel!" Snape hissed. "You know someone is trying to steal what that beast is guarding. What I cannot understand is why you are protecting them. You are going to tell me, Quirrel. I will not have the security of Hogwarts jeopardized. Dumbledore relies on me for such things. I am far more qualified at protecting this school from Dark Magic than you are...."

Another short pause-Quirrel let out a little squeak of horror.

"I-I s-see, S-Severus. I-If t-that is the c-case, p-perhaps it is y-y-y-you-"

"Do not insinuate such things, Quirrel! I have no interest in what the thing is guarding, nor have I any interest in those types of proceedings any longer. Someone does. You know who they are, and believe me, you are going to tell me one way or the other. I am not shy about the use of Unforgivable Curses... if you understand.... Even one so feeble minded as you knows the function of the Cruciatus Curse."

"T-That's a h-h-hefty t-threat, S-Severus. I-Illegal, t-too!"

"And what would you do? Go to Dumbledore. You know very well that he will find out what it is you know. I would use Veritaserum on you, Quirrel, but it is not worth brewing. Unfortunately, I do not have any stored at the present moment, a foolish mistake, perhaps...."

There was another pause.

"It's nearly time for the game. I'll be watching you, Quirrel. We'll have another little chat soon."

Harry heard movement behind the door. His heart thumped erratically against the walls of his chest. He was sure he wasn't supposed to hear what Snape was talking about. All thoughts of asking him about hexes vanished. He'd been eavesdropping. Snape wouldn't like that.

Harry grabbed the invisibility cloak, which he had taken to carrying with him ever since he began spying on Ron and Hermione, out of his pocket and slung it over himself. He moved out of the way of the door just before it burst open and Quirrel practically ran through. He was followed by Snape who made no attempt to catch up with Quirrel as the frightened, stuttering professor moved hastily away.

Harry watched them exit the classroom. He was right. Snape wasn't after what Fluffy was guarding. Harry hadn't thought that he was in the first place, but this made it undeniable. Granger had her own motivations. She was lying to Ron about Snape. Ron was a buffoon. He was Hermione's tool, sort of like Snape was trying to force Quirrel to become an informant.

So, Quirrel knew something. Someone was trying to break in and steal what Fluffy was guarding....

It was Hermione, Harry knew. Maybe Quirrel was trying to protect her from Snape.

If Snape found out, she'd most certainly be expelled. Perhaps Quirrel thought her attempts were harmless, so that was why he shielded her. But Quirrel was an idiot. Harry could feel a headache threatening overcome him at the thought of Quirrel's ineptness.

Harry wondered if maybe he should tell Snape about Hermione. But then he realized he could handle this. Snape would find out in due time. Besides, Snape was always hinting to Harry that he should get things done on his own.

Harry would solve this on his own. He didn't need to get Snape involved.

Harry felt like kicking himself when he remembered that he had a Quidditch match to play.

He no longer cared about the hexes on his broom. The information he'd just discovered was too much to consider. It was still on Harry's mind even as he sprinted as fast as he possibly could toward the Quidditch Pitch.

By the time he arrived at the locker rooms, he was out of breath, and he'd come to the conclusion that Snape was already on high alert. He'd stop someone if they tried to curse Harry's broom. He was on the lookout for trouble.

The Slytherin team was already dressed. Flint exploded as soon as he saw Harry, demanding to know why he'd taken such a long time. Harry told him he'd gone to see Snape again, but did not do anything to better Flint's mood.

As Harry stripped off his school robes and traded them for his Quidditch garb, Flint shouted at him about the game plan. Apparently the Ravenclaw Seeker rode a slow broom and wouldn't be much of a match for Harry. But Flint also warned that the Seeker knew how to hide the fact he'd found the Snitch and was slow and secretive about it. Flint advised Harry to stick close to the enemy at all times.

When Harry stepped on the field, he knew exactly what he had to do. Flint had made it very clear by screaming it into his ear.

He kicked off from the ground at the sound of the whistle and did what was required of him.

Nothing happened during the course of the game. His broom was not cursed.

The only oddity was that, when Harry found the Snitch, he was going far too fast, having given up on following the Ravenclaw Seeker. The Snitch had actually collided with his face and immediately zipped off in the opposite direction.

It hadn't taken Harry that long to catch it and to win the game. The Slytherin's cries of victory were deafening. This meant they'd play for the Cup. Flint, amazingly, was still peeved at Harry for being late. However, the captain didn't have time to finish his telling Harry off as the Slytherins swept their victorious Seeker away.

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In the few days following, Harry was forced to recount his tale of the game numerous times., He was once again the subject of Slytherin pride as well as the target of the Gryffindors.

Things eventually died down as everyone was forced to return to their studies. Harry, Draco and Blaise continued to keep a watchful eye on Ron and Hermione who spent less and less time in the library these days.

Harry was almost convinced they'd give up until he saw Ron enter the library a week into May. Harry had been in there doing research for a Transfiguration essay with Draco. He'd also been halfheartedly glancing through random volumes for any sign of Flamel.

Harry watched Ron take a seat at one of the tables. He began to pore through an old, thick volume. He tapped Draco on the shoulder and gestured toward Ron.

Both Harry and Draco sat down near Ron, close enough to hear him, hopefully, if they had to.

After a time, Hermione entered the library, an amazingly thick tome in her arms.

She set it down before Ron. Harry watched her from the corner of his eyes.

"How could I have been so stupid?" she asked of the ceiling.

Madam Pince immediately ambushed her and told her to shut it, otherwise she'd be kicked out.

Hermione, thoroughly admonished, sat down across from Ron and spoke to him in a quieter voice. Harry had to strain to hear, but he could make out what they were saying well enough.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"I found him," said Hermione. "I found Flamel."

Harry, in his peripheral vision, saw her make a motion, probably indicating the book she'd brought in with her. He could see Draco trying to listen as well.

"What's that?" Ron inquired.

"I picked this up ages ago for a bit of light reading."

"This is light?"

There was a pause.

Hermione must have glared at Ron. Harry could not fully see them out of the corner of his eye.

"Right," said Ron apologetically. "Go on."

Harry heard the rustling of pages, louder than their voices, as Hermione opened the book.

"Listen to this," she said. She then began to quote a passage. "'The ancient study of alchemy has a primary concern, namely to create a Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life which has the power to make the drinker immortal.'"

"Immortal?" said Ron.

"It means you'll never die."

"I know what it means!" snapped Ron indignantly.

"Quiet! Now, listen. 'There have been reports of multiple Philosopher's Stones being created over the centuries. The only Stone currently in existence, however, belongs to Mr. Nicholas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quite life in Devon with his wife Parnelle.' She's six hundred and fifty-eight."

"Blimey," said Ron.

"I know," said Hermione, though she didn't sound as astounded. "That's what Fluffy's guarding. That's what Snape wants. The Philosopher's Stone."

Harry saw Draco's fist clench at the preposterous accusation.

Harry shook his head slightly. Draco narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt an acute pain flare up in his head. It was centered on his scar. It was a feeling quite like the headaches he got listening to Quirrel's babbling lectures, but it was much more focused this time. The pain was searing, like someone was pressing a hot poker to Harry's scar.

Harry pressed his forehead into his hand.

Draco looked at him, but Harry shook his head, dismissing whatever concern Draco might have.

Neither Ron nor Hermione noticed.

The feeling passed after a moment, but Harry knew that it meant something. Things like that didn't just happen without cause.

There was danger.

He now knew why Quirrel was afraid to tell Snape who was searching for the Stone.

It was Voldemort.

Hermione was an idiot, then. She thought Snape was after the Stone? Harry knew that the idea was absurd. He knew now that it must be Voldemort. Somehow, the Dark Lord was searching for the Stone. He was going to try and get it. Soon. Quirrel knew somehow. Maybe Voldemort had threatened him in order to let him in the castle or something.

Harry felt the pain again.

Tonight. It would happen tonight. Harry did not know how, but he was sure of it.

"We've got to get to it before he does," Hermione whispered to Ron. "We know how to get past Fluffy. That stranger that Hagrid said sold him the... you know."

"Don't remind me. Filch nearly caught us that night. Of course Hagrid should've known that a bloody dragon was going to get too big to hide. Someone was bound to notice it. Glad we got rid of Norbert."

Draco narrowed his eyes. Harry raised his eyebrows. Hagrid had had a dragon?

"It doesn't matter," snapped Hermione.

She was right, Harry thought. Harry didn't particularly care if Hagrid had had a dragon called Norbert that got too big to raise.

"Hagrid told the stranger who sold him the egg about Fluffy and how to get past him. That was Snape!"

No, Harry thought; that must have been Voldemort. Somehow, he'd returned. Harry knew it. It only made sense. Voldemort had given him his scar. If it was hurting, it meant Voldemort was up to something, or that there was danger abroad that was somehow connected to the Dark Lord. The scar was warning Harry. It had been trying to tell him something all year, he just hadn't noticed it. It hadn't been powerful enough. He'd thought it was headaches.

"Blimey," said Ron.

"We need to go and get the Stone tonight, now that we know what it is."

"Tonight?" Ron asked.

"Yes, tonight! We should've asked Hagrid earlier about Fluffy. Snape could've tried any time by now. Come on. Let's go."

"To where?"

"The common room! We have to figure out how we're going to do this."

Ron grunted something and they both stood up and left, unaware that their entire conversation had been overheard. Harry and Draco exchanged looks.

"A Philosopher's Stone," said Draco. "What would the mudblood want with that? Gold?"

"I don't think Granger is after it," said Harry. His scar flared up in pain again. He clasped a hand to it; an involuntary reaction.

"Something wrong with your head, Potter?"

"My scar," said Harry. "It keeps burning. It has been all year, only I just now realized it. Look, someone is after the Philosopher's Stone. It's not Granger; she's an idiot. Snape knows something is going on. Remember how I told you what I heard when I went down to talk to him before the Quidditch game?"

"Yes," Draco said with a nod. Harry had told him and Blaise what he'd discovered the night after the Quidditch match.

"My scar hurt then, too. I only thought it was a headache because it's never been as bad as it is now."

Harry winced as he felt the pain again.

"Are you trying to tell me your scar knows that someone is trying to steal the Philosopher's Stone?"

Harry shook his head. "Not just anyone. Voldemort."

Draco flinched slightly at the name. "The Dark Lord? But he's dead, Potter. Are you sure it couldn't be one of his followers?"

"He had followers?"

"Of course! My father won't tell me much about them or the Dark Lord, but I know he had followers. One of them was my Aunt Bellatrix. She's in Azkaban now."

"You think one of Voldemort's followers might be trying to get the stone?"

"I don't know, Potter. You're the one with the scar. You tell me."

"I don't know!" Harry snapped. "This has never happened before."

"Well, it can't be the Dark Lord. He's dead. It's got to be one of his followers. My father says they're all in Azkaban, though. Maybe one of them escaped."

"I don't know," said Harry. "But it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"No. We've got to get that Stone before the mudblood does. We've got to do it tonight."

"Right," Harry agreed. "Let's go tell Blaise."

And the plot thickens.... Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter. No filler here, eh? If you have not already, PLEASE read the note at the beginning and attempt to make sense of my ramblings. Believe it or not, they are VERY important. Also, the astute reader should note that it is PERFECTLY logical for Harry to know Voldemort is behind this, but not know why. Remember what the scar IS. That's my rationale. Also, I can't help but mention Bellatrix. She's one of my favorite characters. Anyway, I'm going with the fact that Draco doesn't know his father is a Death Eater yet, he's a bit too young for that at the moment. I think Lucius would believe so, too.

Chapter 14: The Killing Curse

That night, Harry, Draco and Blaise had to wait until the Slytherin common room was finally cleared of all stragglers. Harry briefly considered hexing a troublesome first year that insisted on studying until well past midnight. Every moment they waited was a moment that Voldemort or Granger might try getting the Stone. Granger was a fool. She could not be trusted with the Stone. That was why Harry wanted to stop her. Voldemort would use it for his own nefarious purposes, and Harry simply could not allow that to happen. Voldemort had killed his parents. He was an evil man that deserved nothing less than death. Harry could not allow him to use the Philosopher's Stone to become immortal if there was even a chance that it was within his power to prevent it.

Finally, the last irritating first year went off to bed. Harry produced his invisibility cloak from his pocket. He had already shown Draco and Blaise the cloak and how it worked. Initially, they were shocked to see that Harry had a cloak of such quality. Both Blaise's and Draco's families were quite well off in their finances. Invisibility cloaks were apparently notoriously expensive. Both of them had seen such cloaks before, but they both attested that they'd never seen one as fine as Harry's.

They agreed with Harry that it would be essential for them to use, so they wouldn't get caught on the way to Fluffy. Maybe, if luck prevailed, Hermione and Ron would be found by a patrolling teacher and punished.

Harry wasn't counting on that, though. He threw the cloak over all three of them. It was big enough to hide them all quite well, though they had to stand close together.

In unison, they exited the Slytherin common room and made their way up to the third floor corridor unopposed. It was slow going at first, because they all wanted to move at slightly different speeds, but eventually they were able to synchronize their steps well enough.

All was silent when they reached the door that led into the room that housed Fluffy. It was slightly ajar. Harry yanked the cloak off them and shoved it in his pocket. All three of them drew their wands.

Harry pushed the door open slowly just in time to see a figure fall into the open trap door.

Harry opened the door a little wider. The sound of a harp's strings being plucked and the loud snoring of Fluffy reached his ears. He looked in to see the giant dog sleeping a bit behind the open trap door, his paws resting on either side of it. A large harp stood in the corner. Its strings were being plucked by magic. The lulling, soothing music that issued from the vibrations seemed to have put Fluffy to sleep.

Harry, Draco and Blaise cautiously stepped in. Harry motioned for the trap door. There was no ladder leading down into the completely dark pit. They'd simply have to jump.

Blaise went first. He didn't scream on the way down, so as not to wake Fluffy.

Draco followed Blaise shortly after.

Harry stood at the edge of the pit, and looked down into the inky blackness. He took in a deep breath, trying to banish his fear. He told himself he would not die if he jumped down the hole. After all, there had to be a safe way to at least get down to the Philosopher's Stone. Otherwise, how could it be moved in an emergency?

Harry started when Fluffy gave a loud snort. He was just about to jump into the pit when he realized the harp had stopped playing.

He looked up to see Fluffy rising to his feet. Harry jumped into the pit just as one of Fluffy's three heads took a snap at him.

He landed on something soft and plant like.

"You too?" Ron Weasley cried.

Harry looked around to see that he was sitting on what appeared to be a floor made up completely of vines. Hermione sat directly in front of him, a few feet away, Ron was next to her. Draco was to Harry's right and Blaise was to his left.

"What are you doing here, Harry?" Hermione demanded.

"Trying to stop you, of course," Harry retorted.

"Stop me from what?"

"What do you think, you filthy mudblood?" Draco sneered. "You're trying to get the Philosopher's Stone!"

"I-"

But Hermione's explanation was cut short because, at that moment, the vines on the floor immediately seized all of them. They seemed to have a collective mind of their own. Harry gasped as he felt the plants under him moving, making way so that he could be dragged down beneath them. All five of them slowly began to sink as the vines wrapped around them and pulled them down. Ron began to panic.

"What the bloody hell is going on? What is this?"

"It's Devil's Snare!" Hermione exclaimed, as though she had just realized this. "You have to relax. If you don't, it'll kill you faster!"

"Kill us faster?" Draco snapped.

"If you don't struggle, it should let you go. Don't panic!"

"I'm bloody well panicking!" Ron cried.

"Do what she says, Weasley," said Harry, attempting to relax his muscles like Hermione as the vines wrapped all around his body and pulled him ever lower.

Ron screamed something incoherent.

"That's right, Weasley!" Draco shouted. "Panic!"

Draco laughed as Harry was finally pulled under. For a moment, Harry couldn't breathe. There was nothing but blackness.

Then, suddenly the vines supporting him gave way, and he landed on his feet on the stone floor below. Hermione was already there. Draco arrived soon after, followed by Blaise. They could still hear Ron's muffled screams above.

"We've got to help him!" Hermione cried.

Draco harrumphed. "No we don't. Let's just leave him."

Hermione glared at him momentarily, but then the panicked look on her face returned. She began to pace.

"Devil's Snare," Hermione said to herself. "What did Professor Sprout say...?"

"It likes dark and damp," Harry told her.

"Potter!" Draco snapped. "Don't give her any ideas!"

"Dark and damp," Hermione said to herself. Above, Ron screamed in terror.

"Light a fire," Harry suggested passively. He didn't want to see Ron die like Draco apparently did, but he wasn't really in the mood to help the idiot either. He needed to get the Philosopher's Stone. Unfortunately, Hermione was blocking what appeared to be the only way out of the room. Harry would have tried to get passed her, but even he knew she was a better at magic than he was, and she'd probably stop him and not let him pass until Ron was safe.

"But there's no wood!" Hermione cried desperately.

"Why the bloody hell are you the top of our class?" Blaise yelled. "You're a mudblood, but you can use magic, can't you?"

"Magic! Of course!" Hermione drew her wand, muttered something, and a ball of blue flame shot from the tip at the Devil's Snare. It immediately slackened and Ron dropped down from the mess of it, panting like an animal.

"Lucky we didn't panic," said Ron.

"Lucky Potter decided to be an idiot and help a blood traitor," Draco retorted.

"Oi! What are you three doing here?" Ron suddenly demanded. He seemed to have just remembered that Harry, Draco and Blaise were all there.

"We might ask you the same question, Weasley," said Blaise.

"We're trying to stop Snape from stealing the Philosopher's Stone," Hermione stated assuredly. "What are you doing down here, Zabini?"

"We're trying to stop you from acting like an idiotic mudblood," said Draco.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione demanded.

"We've been watching you," Harry said. "We wanted to know what you were up to."

"What I was up to? What about Snape?"

"Are you daft, Granger?" Blaise cried. "Professor Snape doesn't want the Philosopher's Stone! He's trying to protect it."

"Right," Harry agreed. "I heard him asking Quirrel what he knew about it. Quirrel was afraid to tell him."

"Because Snape was obviously threatening him!" Hermione said indignantly. "Snape wanted to know how to get past the obstacles!"

"No," said Harry. "I heard; he was definitely asking Quirrel what he knew about who was trying to steal the Stone."

"If you're so clever, Potter, who's trying to steal it?" Ron interjected.

"Well, you two, first of all," Harry replied, "because you're both a couple of idiot Gryffindors. Besides you, Voldemort is trying to get it."

Everyone except Harry flinched at the name.

"But he died, Harry," said Hermione. "You caused him to die."

"Well, he's after it somehow," Harry snapped as his scar suddenly burned in pain again. "We need to move, now!"

"What are you talking about?" Hermione cried.

"He's trying to get the Stone right now. My scar-it's burning. It means there's danger! Move out the way, Granger."

"You're wrong about You-Know-Who, Harry," said Hermione. "It's Snape. I think he might be trying to get it for You-Know-Who."

"Get out of our way, you filthy little mudblood," Draco commanded with a sneer.

Hermione stepped aside. Harry, Draco and Blaise exited the tiny room with the Devil's Snare as a roof, and made their way through a downward slanted corridor with a dripping ceiling. They could hear Ron and Hermione trailing behind.

"We're coming with you," Hermione told them.

"Don't expect any help from us," Draco returned.

Quite suddenly, Harry stepped from the corridor into a room with a very high ceiling and a sealed door at the other end. Hundred of what appeared to be birds were flying around everywhere.

Ron pushed his way through them, strode confidently toward the door, and aimed his wand at it.

"Alohomora!" he said.

Nothing happened.

"Idiot!" Draco called. "Do you really think it would be that easy?"

Ron's cheeks reddened, but he said nothing.

Harry approached the door. It was locked, but there was a large keyhole under the handle.

"We need the key," Harry told them.

"What are those?" asked Blaise, pointing at the things flying near the top of the room.

"Birds?" suggested Ron.

"They're keys, you stupid blood traitor," said Draco as he looked at them.

"One of them must unlock the door," Harry said.

"My thoughts exactly, Potter," Draco agreed.

"But there must be hundreds!" said Hermione.

"It'll take us ages to find the right one," Blaise said.

"No," said Harry. "I'm betting that it probably looks different than all the rest.... But how do we get it?"

"Would this help?" Ron asked, stepping from the shadows with a broomstick in hand.

"Immensely," said Harry.

"But who's going to get the key?" Hermione inquired as though the decision was hopeless.

Draco snatched the broom from Ron and threw it to Harry who caught it adeptly.

"Potter, of course," said Draco. "He's the Seeker."

"This is foolish!" said Hermione. "We should use that broom to get out of here and get a teacher before we go any further. That Devil's Snare was bad enough."

"By then it might be too late," Harry said, mounting the broom.

Someone might have tried to protest, but Harry didn't care. He kicked off from the ground and soared into the flurry of flying keys. They all looked the same: long, silver and dull. Each had a pair of white, feathery wings attached to it. Those were what kept them airborne. Harry needed to find the correct key. He was sure it would be different somehow. Those five down there had already wasted

enough time with their arguing. If only Hermione and Ron would've stayed back. He didn't need them.

Then something caught his eye. A large, ornate key. It was gold in color, and had slightly larger wings than the rest of them. Harry lunged for it. It darted away. He gave chase, imagining it was a Snitch.

It dove nearly to the ground. Harry caught it just before he slammed into the floor, and pulled up. He hopped off his broom and looked up to see the rest of the keys madly gathering together.

Harry had a bad feeling about that.

He ran to the door, shoved the key into its corresponding hole, and turned. He opened the door and motioned Draco through. Hermione followed.

Harry turned when Ron cried out in fear. The rest of the keys were now charging straight for them. Harry slipped into the entrance the door had been blocking only moments before. Ron followed behind him and slammed it shut.

A scream came from outside.

Blaise had been left behind.

Harry madly tried to open the door again, but the handle wouldn't budge. It was locked.

"Damn it!" Draco muttered.

"It's obviously meant to trap us here," said Hermione. "I'm sure it takes-"

"Shut up," Harry snapped.

Blaise had stopped screaming.

Harry banged his fists on the door.

"Blaise?"

No answer.

Harry shook his head. "We can't help him."

"Who would want to?" Ron muttered.

Harry glared at him. It was enough to make Ron quiet.

"We need to move," said Harry.

The four of them stepped into the next room housing the next challenge. Draco walked beside Harry in front of Ron and Hermione.

They reached a square room whose floor was mostly a massive chess board. Huge chess pieces, tall as statues, stood on either side of the room. Behind the two rows of the white pieces at the end of the board was a door. Four chess pieces were missing from the black's side. The queen, a knight, a bishop, and a castle.

Harry stepped on to the empty spot a bishop should have occupied, and moved to slip between the pawns. The pawns, however, suddenly moved closer together, preventing him from going through.

"Looks like we have to play our way across," said Harry.

"All right," said Ron. "I can do this."

Harry and Draco both turned to stare at Ron incredulously.

"You?" they asked in unison.

"Yeah," said Ron. "I love wizard's chess. Play against my brothers all the time."

Ron bounded forward to take the place of the missing knight.

"Okay," he said, "I'll be the knight. Potter, you're already standing in the bishop's spot. Hermione, take the queen's position."

Hermione stepped on the chessboard to comply.

"You take the castle, Malfoy," said Ron.

"You don't give me orders, Weasley," Draco sneered, but he took the spot anyway. "I'm not bad at wizard's chess myself."

"Good," said Harry. "I don't trust...."

The sound of stone grating against stone interrupted him as one of the pawns on the other side of the board moved forward.

"White goes first," Ron muttered.

He called out for one of their pawns, the black ones, to move forward.

And so the game began.

Ron called out for their pieces to move and they followed his direction. Draco stopped him many times to argue about strategy.

Both of them discussed moves before they made them and not in an amicable manner. Neither wanted to give in at first, until they each realized that it was the only way, and they simply had to make the best move.

After a time, all their pawns and most of their other pieces were gone. So were their opponent's.

Harry stood a square or two away from the enemy king. Draco and Ron stood closer to it.

Ron was glancing around desperately. Draco was smiling.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked. She hadn't moved from her spot.

"Weasley's got to sacrifice himself in order for Harry and me to get checkmate," Draco said with a laugh.

"What?" Hermione cried. "You can't, Ron!"

"Malfoy could sacrifice himself, too," Ron returned. "Potter and I could get checkmate."

"There's no way I'm sacrificing myself in place of a blood traitor," Draco said.

"Shut it!" Harry snapped. "Both of you! This has gone on too long! Weasley, move."

"Harry!" Hermione cried. "You can't!"

"I might need Draco's help. Weasley can't do anything except play chess."

Ron glared at Harry. "All right, Potter. A lot easier to sacrifice your enemies, isn't it?"

"Nothing personal," said Harry, "you're just useless."

"Ron, you can't!" Hermione cried.

"I've got to!" Ron shouted. "Malfoy's too much of a coward and the Philosopher's Stone is more important."

"I am not a coward, Weasley," Draco sneered. "I'm just not incompetent."

Ron ignored him. "It'll be all right, Hermione," he said reassuringly.

Hermione did not look reassured.

Ron took a deep breath, glared one last time at Draco and Harry, and moved forward a space. The stoic king turned, and with his stony fist, struck Ron across the side of the head.

Ron fell flat on the floor, unmoving.

"No!" Hermione cried.

Harry turned to see her about to take a step toward the motionless Ron. He held out a hand, gesturing wildly for her to halt.

"Stop, Granger!" he ordered. "The game's still going."

"Move diagonally to your left, Potter," said Draco. "We'll have him."

Harry complied. At first, nothing happened.

"Checkmate," said Draco.

The king exploded into shards of stone and a plume of dust.

Immediately, Hermione ran to Ron's side.

"He's all right!" she cried in relief, "just unconscious."

"Good," said Draco as he and Harry approached the door that led to the next challenge.

Hermione followed them. "Wait!" she cried.

Harry turned to face her. "I'm not apologizing for sacrificing Weasley. You said he's fine anyway."

"That's not what I was going to ask. I'm going with you three. This is too important to stay behind."

"We don't need your help, Granger," Draco sneered.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that, Draco Malfoy," snapped Hermione. "You... you coward!"

Draco drew his wand.

"Enough!" Harry cried. "Granger, if you want to come with us, fine. You can't slow me down, though. You're right about one thing, this is too important. We've wasted a lot of time already."

"Potter's right," said Draco grudgingly. He stowed his wand. "Let's go."

Harry started forward and opened the door. The three of them stepped into a room that was quite bare except for a table, upon which were seven different sized bottles containing potions. A small piece of parchment sat in their midst. The exit was on the wall to their right. A sinister black fire sprang up before it, blocking access.

Harry turned to see a purple fire blocking the door that they had come through.

"What now?" Hermione asked.

Harry didn't reply. He approached the table holding the bottles of potions and picked up the piece of parchment. Instructions were written upon it.

It read:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,

One among us seven will let you move ahead,

Another will transport the drinker back instead,

Two among our number hold only nettle wine,

Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in the line.

Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,

To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:

First, however slyly poison tries to hide,

You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;

Second, different are those who stand at either end,

But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;

Third, as you can clearly see, all are different size,

Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their inside;

Fourth, the second on the left and the second on the right

Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

"Great," said Harry. "Riddles."

"Let me see that," said Draco. He snatched it from Harry and gave it a read. Hermione stood behind his shoulder, reading it too.

"This is a challenge of logic," she said. "Not magic. Most wizards haven't even got an ounce of-"

"We get the point," said Draco.

"So, what potion is it?" Harry asked.

"The smallest one," said Draco and Hermione in unison.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked them, picking up the bottle. There was hardly enough potion left for a mouthful. Voldemort had been here.

"Yes," they said again in unison. Draco glared at Hermione.

"Do you know how to get out?" Harry asked.

"I do," said Hermione.

"So do I," said Draco.

"Then you'd both better go get Weasley and try to get through to Blaise. One of you needs to take the broom back up into the school. Get Snape or Dumbledore. There's not enough potion for either of you to come with me."

"Harry..." Hermione trailed off.

"Potter-"

"No," said Harry, cutting them off. "I don't have time to argue about this. I need to go. Now."

"I'll get Professor Snape," said Draco.

"Good," Harry replied.

"You'll make it, Harry," said Hermione. "You're a great wizard."

Harry paused for a moment before he drank the potion.

"Thanks..." he said.

He drank it all down in one gulp. It was tasteless stuff, and cold.

It made Harry's entire body suddenly cold, as though a tub of icy water had just been poured all over him.

Harry looked back at Draco and Hermione.

"Go," he told them.

Then, without hesitation, he walked through the black flames and through the door behind them.

XxX

Harry found himself at the top of a short staircase. He descended on to a landing and saw before him a plain, square room. The ceiling was dripping with water. Lit torches lined the bare walls, held in brackets; providing light. Another few stairs led down to the floor.

The room was empty except for two things.

First, the Mirror of Erised stood at the end, and before it stood a robed man wearing a turban. Harry could hardly believe his eyes. He descended the steps and walked on to the floor.

"You?" Harry asked.

Quirrel turned to face him, a scowl on his face.

"Yes, Potter," he snapped. "It was me all along."

"But... I thought...."

"Oh... you thought I was a helpless, pathetic, cowardly little man without a shred of intelligence?" Quirrel asked, his voice mocking. There was no trace of his usual stutter impeding his speech. "You thought like Snape, didn't you, boy? Of course it was me! Who would ever suspect p-poor, s-stuttering Professor Quirrel."

"But...."

"I'm surprised to see you made it through all the challenges, Potter. I myself made quick work of them, of course."

Quirrel turned to face the Mirror of Erised again.

"But, I can't seem to make sense of this," he said. "Perhaps you can help me, Potter?"

"No," said Harry defiantly.

Quirrel turned back to face him once more. "I'm afraid you have no choice, Potter. What is this mirror? I see myself in it. I'm holding the Stone. But how do I get it...? TELL ME!"

Harry flinched at Quirrel's sudden mood swing. The Professor's face was suddenly contorted in fury.

"I don't know!" Harry returned.

"He lies," hissed a chilling, disembodied voice that made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand on end. "Use him."

Quirrel narrowed his eyes at Harry. "Come here, Potter!"

"No!" Harry said defiantly.

He spun to retreat up the stairs but a blazing inferno sprang up to block his path. Harry had to back away from the roaring flames. They were far too hot. He turned to face Quirrel and drew his wand.

Quirrel laughed and casually waved his own wand.

Harry flinched as his only weapon was wrenched from his hand by Quirrel's magic. It flew to the wall of the room, hit it, and then fell to the ground.

"You'd think to use magic against me?" Quirrel asked. "Idiot boy! COME HERE!"

"No!" said Harry again.

Quirrel aimed his wand.

"Crucio!"

Harry was on suddenly on the ground. Everything hurt. His skin was on fire, being stabbed by a million white-hot knives. It was a thousand times worse than the pain of his scar had been. Everything was pain: breathing, moving, simply existing. To hear the sound of his own screams was agony to Harry. And then, when he thought it could not get any worse, it did. His scar erupted in pain, a burning, searing agony. It was now even worse than the magic Quirrel was using on him.

"Crucio!"

The agony from the magic vanished. Only Harry's scar hurt now.

Harry found that he was lying on the floor. He was now covered in cold sweat. He realized he was still screaming. He closed his mouth.

Quirrel laughed manically.

"Up, Potter!" he demanded.

Harry rose to his feet without any effort on his part. He was hoisted by magic. His knees threatened to give way under him after the spell had set him on his feet. He felt as if he were going to vomit. Whatever Quirrel had done to him.... It'd been horrible.

"Congratulations, Harry, my boy." Quirrel sneered. "You've just tasted the Torture Curse! COME HERE, NOW! Or would you like to taste it again?"

Harry stepped forward. When he was close enough to Quirrel, the Professor seized him by the robes and pushed him toward the Mirror of Erised.

Harry tripped over his own feet and fell to his knees before the mirror. He looked up at his own reflection. His skin was bone white and his face was covered in sweat. It shone in the torchlight of the room. Suddenly, Harry's reflection smiled, though no such expression graced the real Harry's face.

Harry watched as his reflection winked at him and patted a hand on the pocket of his robes. Harry suddenly felt a weight in his own pocket.

His reflection then pulled out a blood red stone. Its surfaces glittered in the torchlight.

Harry knew it, then. The Philosopher's Stone was in his pocket. Dumbledore had hidden the stone in the mirror. Harry stood and turned to Quirrel.

"Ask him what he saw," hissed the chilling, disembodied voice.

Quirrel narrowed his eyes. "What did you see, Potter?" he demanded.

"I saw myself winning the Quidditch match against Gryffindor," Harry invented wildly. He must not tell Quirrel of the Stone, no matter what. Even if Quirrel used the Torture Curse again, he could not reveal the Stone's location.

"He lies," said the disembodied voice.

Quirrel took aim with his wand again.

Harry dodged as the Professor bellowed the incantation.

Harry dashed back to the foot of the stairs, but it would be futile to ascend. The fire blocked his path. All he could do was put as much distance between himself and Quirrel as possible.

"Wait," whispered the voice. "Let me speak to him."

Harry turned to see Quirrel, wand clutched at his side, frozen before the Mirror, a look of concern upon his face that replaced the contorted fury.

"Master, you are not strong enough," said Quirrel.

"I have strength enough for this...."

Harry watched in confusion as Quirrel turned his back to him, and began to slowly unravel his purple turban until there was only a thin layer of cloth covering back of his head.

Harry felt his scar twinge in pain.

Quirrel removed the turban fully.

What Harry saw nearly made him scream.

There was a face on the back of Quirrel's bald head. A vile face. Its complexion was chalk-white. It had snake-like slits where its nose should be. Its lip-less mouth was upturned in a chilling smile, and its eyes.... Its eyes were blood red.

Harry's scar erupted in pain again, but he was too horrified to notice.

He was staring into the eyes of Lord Voldemort.

"Harry Potter," said Voldemort in that high, cold voice. "The Boy Who Lived...."

The Dark Lord's face let out laugh that chilled the blood in Harry's veins.

"It's so good to see you, Harry," said Voldemort. "My, how you've grown! When last we met, you were only an infant...."

Harry said nothing.

"Come now, Harry. We meet again for the first time in nearly eleven years and you can't even say 'hello'?"

"You killed my parents," said Harry.

"Oh, yes," said Voldemort dismissively, as though this were a trivial fact. "But that's all in the past, Harry. Let us forgive and forget, isn't that what Dumbledore teaches you? The past is of no consequence, you see. It's only the present that matters. Now, tell me, what did you see in the Mirror?"

"I already told Quirrel," Harry said. "You heard."

"Ah, but I heard a lie, Harry. Come now, you wouldn't deny me what I want, would you? We're like old friends, you and I. I've known you since you were a baby."

"You killed my parents!" Harry repeated angrily.

"Yes... regrettable, certainly. But... reversible. Tell me what you saw, Harry. Tell me how to get the Philosopher's Stone and you and I can bring them back. Then, I can teach you magic Dumbledore would never let you learn. I could give you power beyond your wildest dreams, Harry. I see you are in Slytherin. Slytherins crave power. I know you want to learn. All you have to do is tell me what you saw."

"Never," Harry said. "You're lying! You'll kill me if I tell you."

Voldemort sighed. "Harry.... I gave you a chance. All I wanted to know was what you saw, but it really is no matter now. I simply want the Stone, which, conveniently enough, lies in your pocket. Give it to me, Harry, and I will spare your life."

"Liar!"

"Very well, you've made your choice, and you've chosen foolishly. Kill him!"

Quirrel spun and started toward Harry, his hand outstretched, a look of malice on his face.

Harry back stepped and fell against the stairs. Quirrel arrived before him, then. The professor reached out and seized Harry by the throat. But, as soon as Quirrel's fingers touched Harry's skin, the man screamed and pulled back.

Harry saw Quirrel's hand. It was beat red, as though it'd been burnt.

"What is this magic?" Quirrel cried, clutching his hand.

"Use your wand, you fool!" Voldemort commanded.

Quirrel drew his wand, and aimed it at Harry.

Harry got ready to dodge as Quirrel opened his mouth to speak an incantation.

Harry never got the chance to move.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light soared over Harry.

A look of astonishment crossed Quirrel's face. Then, the jet of green hit him square in the chest.

He flew backward into the air and landed on the floor with a thump, unmoving. Dead.

Harry scrambled to his feet and turned to see Snape behind the fire.

The fire abruptly vanished and Snape descended the stairs.

He strode past Harry and knelt down at Quirrel's side.

Suddenly, Quirrel's chest jolted, and what looked like a gust of smoke rose from it.

A piercing, chilling, cold scream sounded in the room, and it nearly made Harry vomit.

Harry's scar seared with pain. He watched the smoke rise, and vanish before it reached the ceiling.

Harry fell back down on the stairs. Snape touched his wand to Quirrel's neck.

Nothing happened.

Snape stood and approached Harry, stowing his wand in his robes.

"Are you all right, Potter?" the potions master asked.

"I feel..." Harry trailed off, afraid that, if he spoke, he would throw up. He felt light headed and, now, suddenly exhausted.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"See what?"

"The Killing Curse, Potter. I used it against Quirrel before he could kill you. Stand. We need to get you to the hospital wing."

"How's Blaise?" Harry mumbled, feeling fainter with every moment. "Where is he? Where's Draco?"

"Mr. Zabini in the hospital wing. He suffered several abrasions from the charmed keys. Mr. Malfoy, Ms. Granger, and Mr. Weasley are already back in the castle. The headmaster is on his way. Are you able to stand?"

"I don't..." Harry paused. "I don't think so."

Whatever Snape said next, Harry did not hear. The faintness intensified to the point where it enveloped him in darkness. Harry could see only black.

Ahem, well. I truly hope that was satisfying enough. As you can see, I tried something a bit different with this chapter. I attempted to make it a bit faster paced, to accent the action in it. I hope I made Quirrel more evil, and it was to your satisfaction. I also hope you enjoyed Snape killing him. I've had that planned since the beginning. One more chapter for the Philosopher's Stone part of this fic. After that, I'll be taking a short vacation to gather my wits. Once I've done that, I shall continue posting and begin Harry's second year after the next chapter.

Chapter 15: Aftermath

In the smoky blackness, there was nothing. Time had no meaning. Existence could have stretched on for days or hundreds of lifetimes. It could have lasted only seconds. One could never be sure.

Somewhere, in the darkness ahead, a door opened. Green light flashed from behind that door. Harry stepped through, unsure of what he would find.

The man seemed to simply glide across the front lawn. He wore a cloak and a hood. His face was snake-like and his eyes were red. The spindly fingers of his right hand were curled around a wand made of yew. He approached the tiny little house in Godric's Hollow undetected. No one came out to meet him, though the house was inhabited.

Light shone through the windows of the small house, making them look like stars in the inky blackness of All Hallows' Eve.

The cloaked man approached the door. Through the window next to it he could see a man with messy, jet black hair. He wore glasses and was laughing along with his wife. She was beautiful with her long crimson hair. In her arms she held a tiny baby boy.

The man aimed his wand at the door. With a tiny flash and bang, the last enchantments protecting the home were broken. The cloaked man strode confidently inside, a smile on his face.

He met an unarmed and frightened James Potter in the hall.

"Lily, it's him! Take Harry and run!"

The baby began to cry as the woman in the next room ran upstairs.

Voldemort smiled from beneath his hood.

It was foolish to be caught unarmed in these troubled times.

Here was prime example:

"Avada Kedavra!" said the Dark Lord. A jet of green light shot from the tip of his wand. It killed James Potter before he could move, maybe he would have tried to arm himself.

The cloaked Dark Lord stepped over Potter's lifeless corpse, and made his way to the next room where he found a staircase. He could hear the baby crying somewhere on the upper floor.

Voldemort ascended the stairs and made his way to the source of the sound. He could hear the woman behind the door he found, whispering to the baby to calm it, saying everything would be all right.

She'd locked the door. She was unarmed, too. Otherwise, she would have done better.

Voldemort said, "Alohomora."

He laughed when he heard the lock disengage. A flick of his wand and the door flew open. He laughed again. The woman was no better than a Muggle without her wand.

She stood near the crib which held the baby.

"Please!" she cried. "Please, don't hurt Harry, not Harry!"

"Step aside, silly girl," said the Dark Lord.

"No! Take me first! Please, don't hurt my baby!"

Voldemort smiled.

"Very well."

A flash of green light, and the woman died first.

The Dark Lord moved toward the crib. He looked down in it to see the baby that was no longer crying.

It seemed almost too easy. The Dark Lord took aim again and muttered the Killing Curse.

There was a flash of green, followed by a blinding flash of white light. An explosion sent the Dark Lord away screaming. He became nothing.

The pain was intense, unbearable, and all-consuming.

Harry jerked into consciousness. He saw nothing but the inside of his own eyelids. He was too tired to open them again. He remembered the flashes of green, and his mother's pleading. He'd seen it from an outside perspective. Not his own. He'd known some of Voldemort's motivation, but he couldn't remember it all. He felt angry. But he was too tired....

Somewhere very far away, two people were speaking.

"I wouldn't be too troubled about this, Severus. I examined his wand. He cast the Cruciatus Curse upon Harry."

"Spineless," said Snape. "The boy is only a first year."

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore. "I imagine the curse had an affect on Harry, along with Quirrel attempting to strangle him. You said one was burnt?"

"Yes, headmaster."

"Hmm," Dumbledore hummed, musing about something.

"What does it mean?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. In a few days, perhaps, I will know more. Severus, I've been keeping an eye on you all year. I was worried you wouldn't be kind to Harry, though he was sorted in to your House."

"He may look like his father, but he is not him."

"Perhaps," said Dumbledore. "Though he seems to have a penchant from breaking the rules."

"I doubt he would have been caught had it been anything less than what it was."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed, Harry would probably never be noticed, walking around the castle at night. Still, Severus, I'm not sure I quite understand your motivations...."

"He is Lily's child, too."

They remained silent for a time.

"I am happy that you are able to look at it that way," said Dumbledore.

"You told me I should when I first came to you."

"Very true, I did. I'm glad you listened. Harry's life will undoubtedly be full of danger. I'm happy to know I can fully count on you to help protect him, Severus...."

Harry heard their voices continue on, but their words lost meaning. Eventually, it all faded to black again.

XxX

When lucidity returned to Harry, it was far more intense. The light stung his eyes as he blinked them open. To his left, he could see several bottles sitting upon a table. He remembered the room with the fire. He remembered the riddles. Purple flame filled his vision and a flash of green.

He jumped, coming fully awake.

He glanced around and found that he was lying in a bed within the Hospital Wing. Except for his bed, all others were empty. The bottles to his left were simply medicinal potions, judging by their labels. Harry really couldn't read them all that well. His vision was quite fuzzy. He spotted what appeared to be his glasses, sitting near the tallest bottle. He reached out, grabbed them, and put them on.

He turned, leaning back down on his pillow, and out of the corner of his eye spotted a figure. His heart skipped a beat and he quickly turned his head to see Dumbledore, sitting to the right of his bed. He wore midnight blue robes, spangled with stars. There was no hat perched atop the old man's head. He smiled at Harry, gazing at him over the half-moon spectacles that rested upon his crooked nose.

"I'm sorry if I startled you, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"It's all right, sir," Harry replied. He yawned.

"How are you feeling?" Dumbledore inquired.

"Tired," Harry replied. That was probably an understatement. Harry really felt quite exhausted.

"Understandable, though you've been resting nearly three days."

Harry started, suddenly recalling something of great importance.

"Quidditch-"

"Is this Friday, Harry," said Dumbledore, extending his hands in a calming gesture. "Calm yourself, or I shall have to call Madam Pomfrey and she will give you a sedative."

"Sorry, sir," said Harry, leaning back. "I'm a bit...."

"On edge? Understandable as well, Harry. I noticed you'd been dreaming. Your sleep has been rather restless. I asked Madam Pomfrey to give you a potion for dreamless sleep, but it didn't have much of an effect. What were you dreaming, Harry?"

Harry thought a moment. He couldn't recall. It'd been horrible. It hadn't been quite a dream, really. Harry remembered the vivid clarity of it, the sharpness of the images, but he couldn't remember the subject. The more he tried, the faster it slipped away. It was like water through a strainer, not even sand through a sieve. It was gone so fast. What residue it left behind was vague at best. Harry remembered screams and green light. He'd had the dream before. It was about his parents dying. This time it'd been more vivid, yet he couldn't remember. It was gone. He thought he should be glad that it was.

"I don't know, sir," said Harry. "I don't remember."

"Hmm," hummed Dumbledore, considering things. "Can you remember what happened down under the school?"

"Yes," said Harry. He remembered that much. "Quirrel was there. Voldemort... was on the back of his head."

"Indeed, he was, Harry."

"So, he's alive?"

"Not exactly. Through some dark magic, he bound himself to Professor Quirrel, and was little more than a parasite on a host. You, of course, know Hagrid, our gamekeeper?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Hagrid will attest that many unicorns have been killed in the Forbidden Forest. Lord Voldemort was using their blood to sustain himself until he could reach the stone. Unicorn blood can keep one alive, even if they are an inch from death. However, the price is terrible. You see, Harry, Voldemort is little more than the weakest ghost right now."

"So, he is alive?"

"I believe so, though you managed to keep him from gaining immortality. I'm proud of you, Harry."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Do you recall the moment when Professor Quirrel attempted to kill you?"

"Yeah. He tried to choke me."

"But he could not?"

"No."

"His hand was burnt by touching you?"

"Yes."

"As I suspected," said Dumbledore. "Do you know why this is, Harry? Why Professor Quirrel, and, by extension, Lord Voldemort, could not touch you?"

"No, sir."

"It was because of your mother. You see, Harry, she sacrificed herself to save you. That kind of act leaves a mark."

Harry brushed his bangs away to reveal the scar on his forehead.

"No. This kind of mark is not visible to the naked eye. It dwells in your very soul."

"What is it, sir?"

"Love, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"How can love defeat Voldemort, Professor?"

"Because, Harry, the magic your mother invoked upon sacrificing herself is a power that Lord Voldemort does not understand. He discounts it because he's never experienced love and therefore does not understand its nature. He is powerful and dangerous and murderous, Harry. He is all of those things, but he is also arrogant, and he has never known love. His lack of knowledge is a great short coming. He cannot hope to protect himself against that power."

"I see," said Harry. He understood the theory of what Dumbledore was telling him. He had witnessed the reality. It made him think. When had he ever really experienced love? Never from the Dursleys, certainly. Never in his life except at a time he'd been so young, he couldn't remember.

"Yes..." said Dumbledore, trailing off. He reached over to a table Harry had not seen before. It was to the right side of his bed. Harry looked toward where Dumbledore extended his hand and found that the table was filled with quite a few different packages of candy. "I believe Ms. Granger, Mr. Zabini, and even Mr. Malfoy left a few of these here for you, Harry. Ah, Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. I must admit that I haven't had any in a long time. I was rather put off when I stumbled across a bogey flavored one. I think, perhaps... it could be safe."

Dumbledore opened the bag of Every Flavor Beans and popped one into his mouth.

"Alas, ear wax."

Harry smiled as Dumbledore chuckled.

"Well, Harry, I think I shall be taking my leave now. Oh, I must tell you, what happened under the school involving Professor Quirrel is a complete secret. Naturally, the entire school knows. Of course, they do not know that Lord Voldemort was truly involved. It would be best if that particular fact wasn't confirmed. I have already spoken to Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Zabini, Ms. Granger, and Mr. Weasley about the matter. Voldemort is, at the moment, no longer dangerous to us now."

"Right, sir," said Harry.

Dumbledore smiled warmly. "Very good, Harry. Rest up! You've got a busy few weeks ahead of you before term ends."

Indeed, Harry did. His last few weeks in Hogwarts were the most challenging and rewarding of the year. All week he studied for finals, practiced for the final Quidditch game, and told his story about Quirrel dozens of times.

The Slytherins won the Quidditch Cup against the Gryffindors. Harry was celebrated as a hero in the Slytherin House, and he, once again, became the subject of Gryffindor attacks. They weren't as bad this time around because finals were fast approaching.

Harry no longer gave Hermione the cold shoulder in Potions. They became almost amicable again. She was the only Gryffindor Harry didn't really despise. He felt neutral about Ron Weasley, but Harry was sure that Ron hated him because of the wizard's chess obstacle under the castle. Ron had suffered a minor concussion from his sacrifice, but was otherwise fine.

The week of finals arrived. Harry sat near Blaise, who'd been attacked by charmed keys under the school, in Transfiguration. Blaise was a bit cut up, but all the abrasions were healing well. Some of them looked a bit nasty, though. Blaise insisted they didn't hurt, but made it very clear that he blamed his condition on Ron Weasley shutting the door on him.

Harry found his Transfiguration final to be horribly difficult, but he thought he'd passed it. He also thought he passed Charms. Potions was glaringly difficult as well, although Harry was quite sure he did reasonably well. There was no exam for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Everyone was awarded a free Outstanding on their record because of it. The seventh years were particularly happy about that. The only final Harry knew he failed was History of Magic.

The pressure that lifted off the student body when the exams were finally completed was palpable. They enjoyed their last two days in Hogwarts test-free, with very little work in classes.

On their last night came the end of the year feast and the awarding of the House Cup. It had, of course, gone to the Slytherins, because the Great Hall was all decked out in green and silver banners.

Before the feast began, however, Dumbledore stood up to say a few words.

"Welcome, students, to the end of the year feast. Seventh years, we wish you the best of luck in your pursuit of magical careers. A fine graduating class you have been. Everyone else, we look forward to seeing you next year. Now, before we eat, there is a small matter of the House Cup. As you can see, the Slytherin House appears to be victorious—" Dumbledore paused to allow the Slytherins to cheer, "—however, I have a few last-minute points to award.

"First, to Mr. Neville Longbottom, I award twenty-five points. It takes great courage to stand up to your enemies, but even greater courage to stand up to your friends."

The Gryffindors burst into applause. Harry frowned, wondering what in the world Longbottom had done to earn himself twenty-five points.

"Secondly," Dumbledore continued. "I award fifty points to Mr. Ronald Weasley for his outstanding talent at wizard's chess."

The applause from the Gryffindor table increased in volume. Dumbledore had to wait a moment for it to die down before he could be heard again.

"Thirdly, I award fifty points to Ms. Hermione Granger for her outstanding logic!"

The applause from the Gryffindor table was deafening. The extra points had put them ahead of the Slytherin.

"Calm yourselves, Gryffindors, calm yourselves," Dumbledore gently admonished. "I am not finished. I believe you are now nearly a hundred points ahead of Slytherin...."

"Well, to Mr. Blaise Zabini and Mr. Draco Malfoy, I award them both fifty points, split evenly. Twenty-five for Mr. Zabini's great helpfulness, and twenty-five for Mr. Malfoy's stealth and cleverness.

"Lastly, I award Mr. Harry Potter fifty points for outstanding services to the school. This, I believe, brings the houses of Slytherin and Gryffindor into a tie! This is unprecedented and has not happened for nearly three hundred years. All of you should consider yourselves lucky to witness it. I believe a change of decorations is in order!"

Half of the banners in the Great Hall suddenly changed color. They went from green and silver to red and gold. Some of the Gryffindors cheered, some of them remained silent. The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws applauded because of the fact that someone other than Slytherin had taken at least half of the victory. Most of the Slytherins merely booed.

Dumbledore smiled as if he didn't notice and the feast began.

Harry rolled his eyes at Dumbledore's purposefulness. He'd tied the Slytherins and the Gryffindors by his own will. Harry found that ridiculous. He rolled his eyes and glanced at Snape who also wore an exasperated look. The absurdity of such a thing was simply Dumbledore's meddling. Snape caught Harry's gaze, narrowed his eyes, and gave a slight nod of his head. Harry took it as a small bit of congratulations for everything he'd done throughout his first year. Harry nodded back.

The feast ended quickly, though Harry savored each moment. He had no desire to leave Hogwarts. Though it'd been a cold place to him in the beginning, it was now like a second home. Sometimes the student body was unfavorable toward him, sometimes they weren't. He had a few real friends here. At the Dursleys, he had nothing.

Alas, Harry awoke the next morning and gathered what was left for him to pack in his trunk. He picked up Hedwig's cage and fed her an owl treat. He was thankful that McGonagall bought him the owl. Without her, he'd have had to use a school owl to get his broom, and he wasn't sure if they would've delivered to the Owlery. They were notoriously unreliable.

Blaise and Draco told Harry they would write over the summer as they headed out of their dorms and into the Entrance Hall where they found Hagrid waiting to lead them to Hogsmeade and the Express. McGonagall, Snape, and several other professors were there, too.

Before Harry left through the oak front doors, McGonagall stopped him.

"Mr. Potter, remember, it is illegal to use magic outside of school."

"I know, Professor," said Harry.

"Good, good, as long as you know. However, what your aunt and uncle do not know cannot hurt you."

"I understand, Professor," Harry said with a small grin.

"Also, if you would kindly give your uncle my regards, I would appreciate it."

Harry nodded. "Yes, Professor."

"Very good. Off you go, I will see you next year."

"Goodbye, Professor."

Harry strode toward the doors to catch up with Draco and Blaise. Snape, however, blocked his way.

"Potter, it would not do to break the rules outside of Hogwarts. I understand your Muggle caretakers are unpleasant. Oftentimes, Muggles will believe something they fear to be true, even if it is false. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Professor," said Harry. "McGonagall told me the same thing."

"Odd. Good day, Potter."

"Good day, Professor."

Harry caught up with Draco and Blaise before they reached the Express. As they took their seats in a vacant compartment, they looked out to see Hagrid waving goodbye at them all until he disappeared in the distance. The ride back to London was uneventful and silent, Harry bought far more sweets from the trolley than necessary so that he could save them for himself over the summer.

When they arrived at Kings Cross, Harry left the train alone after bidding Draco and Blaise goodbye. He passed Lucius Malfoy who acknowledged him with a nod. He had to pass through the Weasley family. Their youngest daughter, who'd be a first year next year, looked at him as he passed.

He ignored her and passed through the barrier.

He found the Dursleys waiting for him. They seemed to be in a bit of a sour mood that only worsened when they saw him. Harry sighed. He already couldn't wait for next year.

Cool! This concludes year one. Sorry for a rather uneventful chapter, but I hope you enjoyed McGonagall and Snape's advice and such. Anyway, give me a while and I'll have the next chapter or two up. I just have to take a breather to get my wits about me. I also am going to have to think of clever abusive situations to put Harry in, and clever ways for Harry to fight back.... I already know how I'm avoiding the flying car incident.... Anyway, I BROKE 100 REVIEWS! I'm so happy. I've never done that before. Thanks to everyone who's read thus far. Next chapter will be up soon, and it will start the COS year. Also, I'm going to subtitle this first year bit Part I: The Dark Beginnings. And... I'm going to just continue number chapters in chronological order, so the next one will be 16, just because I'll get confused if I don't.

Part II: The Heir of Slytherin

Chapter 16: Cold Summer

When Harry had first returned to the Dursley's home from Hogwarts, they'd hardly spoken a word to him. They ate dinner in silence that night. It consisted mostly of pork chops and potatoes. Aunt Petunia made sure to give Harry the smallest, fattiest, driest, unseasoned piece of pork she'd cooked. Perhaps she thought him stupid enough to believe she simply neglected to tend to it as well as the others. Harry was sure that this was his welcome home present: the dull pork and the undercooked potato. Harry realized he'd become a bit spoiled at Hogwarts. Normally, he would've eaten every bite of the poor excuse for a dinner Aunt Petunia cooked him. Now, he barely ate half.

He was locked in his cupboard that night. He went to sleep hungry. The Dursleys hadn't even said a word to him. They'd simply let him shove his trunk into the cupboard, along with Hedwig's cage. It was cramped in there to begin with. Now, with the trunk and the cage, there was hardly any room. Harry had to sleep curled up in a tiny ball.

When he awoke the next morning, the Dursleys ignored him.

This became a trend that Harry quite enjoyed at first. He liked the minimal interaction with the Dursleys. The only time they ever spoke to him was if Aunt Petunia was too lazy to do something and wanted to pass it off to him. After a time, however, they seemed to notice that Harry was content with their ignorance of him, and they began to take it to the extreme.

They kept Harry confined to his cupboard. The only time he was let out was in the morning. He had to use that time to relieve himself and take a bath, and, maybe, if he was lucky, Aunt Petunia would give him a piece of toast for breakfast. Other than that, he was locked under the stairs all day and all night. The Dursleys opened the small grate in the door of the cupboard from time to time to slip a piece of cheese or bread through so Harry could eat. The only time they opened the door to give him any sustenance was when they had to give him a cup of water to drink. Other than those tiny meals, Harry went largely hungry and thirsty.

To make things worse, he had to share a bit of his food with Hedwig every now and then. If he failed to, she'd get angry. Her cage began to stink. Uncle Vernon never let Harry clean it out because he did not want owls flying around his house.

Harry grew to hate his cupboard even more as the Dursleys continued to neglect him. He hated his life here. He was always hungry, always thirsty, and his legs and arms and joints were always cramped from sitting in a confined space all day and night. He stunk of owl droppings, too. Eventually, Uncle Vernon insisted he clean the cage, but he had to do it in the backyard. The task had been neglected too long. Cleaning the cage didn't remove the smell from the cupboard.

The Dursleys did not seem to appreciate that. They fed him even less. Harry was forced to dig into his trunk and ration the sweets he'd bought on his trip back to London on the Hogwarts Express.

One day, the Dursleys failed to let him out of his cupboard at all.

Harry was beginning to remember just how much he hated it here. Perhaps it was wrong to think such things of family, but Harry despised the Dursleys.

They continued their policy of ignoring Harry for weeks. They kept him in his cupboard and pretended he didn't exist. He became sick of having no food or water very quickly. He began to think of ways to sneak out at night so that he could raid the refrigerator and find something that would actually fill him up all the way.

One day, Aunt Petunia ordered Harry to take out the trash when the Dursleys decided to free him from his cupboard. Harry found something interesting on top of all the rubbish in the trash bin. It was an old credit card that Uncle Vernon had tossed out.

Harry snatched it, pocketed it before anyone noticed, and then complied with Aunt Petunia's order.

That night, when Harry was sure the Dursleys were fast asleep, he began to try and open the door with the credit card. It was quite difficult and it took Harry a long time before he finally got it.

He opened the door slowly, so as not to make any sounds, and quietly stepped out of his cupboard. Harry crept into the kitchen, opened the door to the refrigerator, and stole food. He tried to take things that the Dursleys wouldn't miss. He also raided the cupboards. From there, he took a bit more than he needed so he could ration it like the sweets from the Hogwarts Express if he had to.

Harry continued this nightly ritual for a week or so. Each time he fought the door to his cupboard with that bloody old credit card, he hated the Dursleys even more. He should not have to do this. He was above such treatment. He didn't understand why he deserved it. Harry hated the law that said you couldn't use magic outside of Hogwarts. He wouldn't even need the credit card if he could. Alas, his wand lay buried in his trunk with all the rest of his school things.

One night, Harry got brave and stole a piece of cake from the fridge.

The next morning, Dudley entered the bathroom as Harry was brushing his teeth with an old toothbrush he'd had for as long as he could remember.

"Oi, Potter!" Dudley bellowed.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"A piece of my cake is missing from the fridge."

"I don't see how that's my problem."

"You stole it, Potter! Admit to it."

Harry spit out the glob of toothpaste into the sink, rinsed it away, and then ran his toothbrush under the tap before he pocketed it. The Dursleys made him keep it on his person at all times.

He turned to face Dudley.

"Yeah, I stole the cake," admitted Harry.

"I knew it!" Dudley squealed, he opened his mouth wide to call for Aunt Petunia.

"And I did it with magic," Harry said as Dudley drew in a big breath.

Dudley's mouth snapped shut. His complexion whitened a little.

"Y-You aren't supposed to be using magic in here, Potter," Dudley said, perhaps attempting to sound brave.

"Well, I have been. I used it every night to open my cupboard door."

"You're going to be in so much trouble."

"Yeah, right. Dudley, let me try to make this clear. If you tell your parents, I will turn you into a pig."

Dudley gasped in fright.

"Don't breathe one word," said Harry. "You know I can do it, and only I can change you back. Personally, I think the life of a pig would suit you. Pigs are fat, kind of like you, Dudley."

"I won't tell nobody," Dudley whispered.

"Thanks, Dudley," said Harry with a small smile. "I won't turn you into a pig... for now."

Harry left a frightened Dudley in the bathroom. Harry smiled as he walked down the stairs and entered his cupboard once again. Snape and McGonagall were right. All he had to do was threaten to use magic. It would work on Dudley, obviously. It might not work on Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon, though. They were older, and a little bit smarter. Not by much, of course, but Harry thought he might have to show them proof of his magic.

Eventually, the neglectful policy the Dursleys had adopted since Harry returned to their home crumbled. Harry thought that they might have considered the fact that, as long as he was around, they could put him to good use instead of locking him away in his cupboard all day.

This decision came on the day that Dudley had several friends over for a night and they created a huge mess of things.

Harry was made to clean it all while Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia took naps. Apparently, they were worn out from keeping an eye on

so many children. That grated on Harry's nerves. If they'd kept an eye on the children, the house wouldn't be in shambles, and Harry wouldn't have to clean it.

Harry cleaned. He cleaned for a long time. Aunt Petunia was very meticulous about cleaning. She finished whatever Harry had missed, such as wiping up a microscopic piece of dust on the counter top. She got mad when she saw Harry had failed to straighten up Dudley's room, and Harry was locked in his cupboard with no food for a day.

Harry was incensed. The Dursleys wanted him to clean Dudley's room? They ought to tell their son to get off his lazy ass and do it himself, thought Harry. He spent the entire day in his cupboard cursing the Dursleys.

Eventually, Hedwig's cage began to smell so bad that Harry thought it the odor would be permanently trapped inside his cupboard. The Dursleys, however, refused to let Harry clean the cage again.

Hedwig did not appreciate this. She grew increasingly more frustrated and made a lot of noise all through the night. It kept Harry awake. Harry gladly dealt with it because it also kept the Dursleys up. He did feel sorry for his owl, though. The condition of her cage was deplorable. It sickened him that she had to live that way. It was yet another thing that made him hate his Muggle relatives.

One morning, following a night where Hedwig had continuously screeched and flapped her wings around, beating the sides of her cage, Uncle Vernon threw open the cupboard door and yanked Harry out by the collar.

"You shut that bloody bird up, boy! I can't stand the noise! I want it stopped this instant!"

"Why don't you let me clean her cage, then? It's dirty and she doesn't like it."

"Absolutely not! You'll not let that bloody pigeon fly around my house. I won't have it!"

"She'll fly around outside," Harry snapped.

"No! Absolutely not!" Uncle Vernon said.

"Well, she's just going to keep making noise until you let her."

Uncle Vernon harrumphed and walked away. That night was another sleepless night as Hedwig kept them all awake again. Finally, Uncle Vernon allowed Harry to clean out her cage. Hedwig appreciated that. She perched on a tree in the back yard, watching as Harry cleaned.

As Harry scrubbed the cage, he found himself thinking about the promises Draco and Blaise had made him. They'd said they would at least write, hadn't they? Harry had not received a letter. Not one. He'd been abandoned by everyone. They left him to suffer the totalitarian rule of his horrible Muggle relatives. He hated it. He hated the Dursleys. He missed Hogwarts terribly. No one there denied him food, or kept him locked in a closet. At Hogwarts, punishments were not given unjustly and for no reason. At least at Hogwarts, Harry had friends. At least, he thought he did.

One day, Uncle Vernon arrived home in an unsufferably chipper mood. Harry scowled as he served dinner and listened to Uncle Vernon talk about how two rich people, Mr. and Mrs. Mason, would be coming to their house for dinner in a week. Uncle Vernon hoped to impress them. Apparently, they owned a large company and Uncle Vernon was hoping they'd order a large shipment of the drills his company made. Harry shook his head at this.

Uncle Vernon declared that things must be perfect for the day of the Mason's coming. He said he didn't want Harry or that owl of his causing trouble. They were going to move him out of the cupboard, at least for now. Uncle Vernon decreed that Harry would have a new bedroom. Harry wondered where that bedroom might be. Unless the Dursleys expected him to magick a new room into existence, there was no place for Harry to go. Uncle Vernon explained that Harry would use Dudley's current toy room as a bedroom. This 'toy room' had once been the guest bedroom, but the Dursleys had allowed Dudley to fill it with the copious amount of toys they provided him with. Mostly, he kept his broken or outdated things in the room. It looked like the dwelling of a young, psychopathic hoarder. Dudley protested when he heard his father's decree, but Uncle Vernon promised him they would visit the store that week and Dudley would get anything he wanted if he complied.

Uncle Vernon ordered Harry to clean out Dudley's old playroom the next day. Dudley would oversee things. He would tell Harry what he wanted to keep and Harry would move it to Dudley's room. If Dudley decided to throw something away, Harry would take it downstairs and outside to the bin.

Dudley wished to keep only the smallest of things, most of which were broken. He ordered Harry to throw away everything else, most of which was large and heavy. The list included two broken bicycles, a dented computer tower, a computer monitor whose screen had been shattered by a baseball, and an old, clunky, thirty-two inch television that Dudley had covered in magnets for amusement.

Harry spent the entire day clearing things away at Dudley's direction. This was not a task he enjoyed. Several times, he considered threatening Dudley with magic, but he stopped himself. On one hand, he hated taking orders from his idiotic cousin, but, on the other hand, he wouldn't be confined to his cupboard all day. Eventually, as Harry cleared away the mountain of broken playthings, an old bed emerged. After this room had been the guest room and before it had become Dudley's trash bin, it had once been Dudley's room. Eventually, Dudley had moved down the hall to a larger room that had succeeded his old room as the guest room. Now, apparently, Dudley was moving into the successor of the second guest room because it was bigger.

When Harry was nearly finished cleaning what was to be his room, Dudley told him to toss out an old, rather large television that was not broken or ruined in any way. Harry had been surprised to find it hiding unbroken behind the bed. Harry hadn't minded taking orders from Dudley all day since he was getting a room out of it, but this was taking it too far. There was no way he was going to move that television. He'd already had to move one today, and that had been nearly impossible. He wasn't eager to repeat the process.

"No," Harry told his cousin. "I'm keeping it."

Dudley frowned at him. "I said I want it gone!"

"I said I'm keeping it," Harry snapped venomously. "You're going to let me, or you'll spend the rest of your life invisible!"

Dudley paled at the threat of more magic. "Y-You can't do that, Potter," he said uncertainly.

Harry, who still carried his invisibility cloak in his pocket, mostly out of habit, took it out and quickly wrapped it around himself.

Dudley gasped when he could no longer see Harry.

Harry took off the cloak and pocketed it.

"That's what'll happen to you. No one will be able to see or hear you," Harry lied. "It'll be like that forever. Do you want that to happen?"

"No," said Dudley, quite terrified now.

"Then I keep the TV," said Harry.

"Right, the TV is yours, Potter," said Dudley.

Harry smiled as his cousin ran away. Dudley had bullied him for years. Harry was glad the tables had finally turned.

The next day, Dudley avoided Harry as he brought the few possessions into his new room, including Hedwig. Harry was happy to finally be able to sleep on an actual bed, rather than the floor.

The day after Harry got his new room was the day the Masons were to arrive. The Dursleys were positively bursting with excitement. Harry found it rather ridiculous.

About an hour before the Masons were due to arrive at the house, Uncle Vernon called everyone into the kitchen to give them a rundown of the schedule.

"This is very important to me, as you all know," said Uncle Vernon. "With any luck, I'll get a deal signed by ten o'clock tomorrow and we'll be shopping for vacation homes in Majorca! Now, let's go over the schedule again. We should all be in our positions at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be...?"

"In the lounge," said Aunt Petunia immediately, "waiting to welcome the Masons graciously into our lovely home."

"Excellent," said Uncle Vernon. "Dudley?"

"I'll be at the door," said Dudley rather pompously. He put on a rather repulsive, simpering smile. "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

Aunt Petunia squealed in delight. "They'll simply love him!"

"Too right you are, Petunia," said Uncle Vernon with a proud smile. Uncle Vernon's smile promptly wilted into a frown as he looked to Harry. "And you...?"

"I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending that I don't exist," said Harry dully.

"Correct," said Uncle Vernon with a scowl. "Now, I'll lead them into the lounge and introduce them to you, Petunia. At quarter past eight...."

"I'll announce dinner," finished Aunt Petunia.

"Right," said Uncle Vernon. "Dudley, you'll say—?"

"May I take your through to the dining room, Mrs. Mason," Dudley said snobbishly, extending one of his chubby arms in a hideously contrived, chivalrous fashion.

"My little gentleman!" squealed Aunt Petunia.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Now, we'll need a few good comments for the Masons during dinner," said Uncle Vernon. "Any ideas, Petunia?"

"Why, Mr. Mason, Vernon tells me you are an excellent golfer'... 'Mrs. Mason, you simply must tell me where you bought your shoes!'"

"Good, good. Dudley?"

"You look simply ravishing tonight, Mrs. Mason'... 'Mr. Mason, we had to write an essay in school about our personal heroes, I wrote mine about you."

"Excellent!" said Uncle Vernon as Aunt Petunia burst into tears of joy and showered her son in kisses.

"And you...?" Uncle Vernon asked Harry.

"I'll still be in my room, making no noise and pretending I don't exist," said Harry monotonously.

"Precisely!" said Uncle Vernon. "This is very important to our family, boy! I'll not have you mucking things up with your... abnormalities and such. Now, upstairs! If you do as we say, you'll eat tomorrow."

Harry didn't reply, he simply turned, trudged upstairs, entered his room, and closed the door. He plopped down on his bed and thought about Hogwarts and his friends. Why hadn't they made contact? He'd been stuck here for weeks, enduring bouts of near-starvation and neglect. Harry despised his life here in Little Whinging, he longed to return to the wizarding world.

After a time, Harry heard the commotion begin downstairs as Mr. and Mrs. Mason arrived. The Dursleys followed their schedule precisely.

Eventually, the chatter died down as dinner began. Harry could hardly hear it anymore.

A loud, cracking noise made him jump. He sat up on his bed to see a short creature, with bat-like ears, a long nose, and bulging eyes as big as tennis balls staring up at him with a sheepish grin. The thing was clad only in what appeared to be a dirty old pillow case.

"Harry Potter!" it squeaked.

"Er..." Harry trailed off. "Hi...."

The creature dropped into a bow so low that its nose touched the carpeted floor. It straightened out and grinned again.

"Harry Potter. Dobby has wanted to meet you for a very long time, sir!" said the creature in its squeaky little voice.

"Thank you..." said Harry, not sure how to respond. "Er... what exactly are you?"

The creature sunk into another low bow. It rose again and spoke very quickly. "A thousand pardons, Harry Potter, sir. I am Dobby, the house-elf."

I am wondering why this fanfic is in so many C2s involving slash pairings.... I mean do you see any of that going on around here? I don't think so. By the way, welcome to Part II! Next chapter will be better. Note: don't expect daily updates.

Chapter 17: Worse

Harry stood up and moved, with his back facing the wall, toward the desk upon which Hedwig's cage sat. The snowy owl was sleeping inside it. Harry took a seat on the chair before the desk. The little house-elf's enormous eyes followed him all the way there.

"Well... hi, Dobby. This really isn't a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom," said Harry as he heard Aunt Petunia's high-pitched, false laugh sound from downstairs. "I mean... why are you here, exactly?"

"Oh," said Dobby. His ears drooped slightly. "Well, Dobby has come to tell Harry Potter.... It is difficult, sir.... Dobby is not sure where to begin...."

"Why don't you have a seat over there," said Harry, pointing to the end of the bed furthest away from him, "and think it over?"

Dobby gasped loudly. "Sit down, sir? Sit... down?"

Without a second's pause, the house-elf suddenly burst into loud, shrieking sobs. The relatively quiet, muffled sounds of the Dursleys and Masons dining together abruptly halted. Harry rushed over to the house-elf.

"Sorry," he said quickly, rather annoyed that this house-elf was about to cause him so much trouble. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Dobby halted his sobs. After a short moment, the sounds of dining resumed. Harry heard Uncle Vernon laugh loudly and blame it on 'the cat'.

"Offend Dobby, sir? No, no, of course not. It's just... Dobby has never been asked to sit down by a wizard, sir. To be treated as an equal...."

Harry grimaced and backed away from the house-elf. Truthfully, he had just wanted Dobby to get further away from him when he'd asked him to sit down. He had no idea what to think of the little creature. He really just wanted it to leave his room.

"Well, you can't have known many decent wizards, then," said Harry.

"Well, no... I haven't," Dobby admitted. The house-elf's face abruptly twisted into a look of terror. He quickly ran to the wall and starting banging his head against it.

"Bad Dobby!" the house-elf cried as it hit its head against the wall. "Bad!"

Once again, the sounds of dining ceased as the Dursleys and their guests paused to listen.

Harry grunted in annoyance, grabbed the house-elf by his pillow case, and yanked him away from the wall. Dobby was lighter than he'd expected and came away easily. The house-elf continued to thrash about even after Harry had pulled him away from the wall. Dobby looked as though he was attempting to punch himself.

"Stop it!" Harry hissed. "Dobby, shut up!"

The house-elf complied with Harry's order immediately and stopped trying to injure himself. Harry promptly set him down, wiping his hand on his trousers. The house-elf's pillowcase had been a bit damp with either sweat or grease. Harry wasn't sure.

"Apologies, sir, but Dobby had to punish himself," said the house-elf. "Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir."

"Does your family know that you're here?" Harry asked. He was only seconds away from breaking the lock on Hedwig's cage and asking her to carry Dobby back to whatever family he had. The house-elf was not helping him in any way. Hedwig could carry him. He was light.

"Oh, no, no, no, sir... if they were to find out.... Well... Oh, dear! Bad Dobby!"

Dobby sprinted toward the desk, grabbed a lamp, and began to beat his skull with it. He cried out in pain with each contact. Harry snatched the lamp away and gave Dobby a small thump on the head to get his attention. Dobby looked up at him with teary eyes.

"Look," Harry snapped, "you have got to stop making such a racket!"

"Apologies, Mr. Harry Potter, sir," said Dobby.

"Just quit trying to hurt yourself," Harry said. "Why are you here?"

"Dobby has heard of your greatness, Harry Potter," squeaked the elf. "But, of your kindness, Dobby never knew."

Harry felt himself growing red in the face. He also experienced a slight twinge of guilt. He wasn't trying to be kind to the elf. He just wanted it to keep its bloody mouth shut. Perhaps the elf mistook Harry's attempt to stop it from hurting itself as kindness. Harry would've gladly hit the elf to make it shut up if that's what it took to make it shut up.

"Whatever you've heard about my greatness is rubbish," said Harry.

"Harry Potter is humble and modest!" squeaked Dobby. "Harry Potter does not speak of his victory of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named-"

"It wasn't much of a victory," Harry snapped, cutting the house-elf off. "My mum and dad died and I'm stuck here with these people. Does that sound like a triumph to you?"

"Of course not, Harry Potter, sir. Dobby just meant that he remembers the times when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was in power...." The house-elf shuddered violently. "Dobby also heard that Harry Potter faced off against You-Know-Who again, just weeks ago, and escaped unharmed!"

Obviously, Dumbledore's effort to ensure the students of Hogwarts didn't know Voldemort was behind Quirrel's attempted thievery of the Philosopher's Stone hadn't worked very well.

Harry nodded in response to the house-elf's statement.

"Harry Potter is valiant and bold!" squeaked Dobby.

"Harry Potter is more sneaky and lucky," Harry muttered.

"Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter from great danger," said the house-elf as though he hadn't heard Harry. "Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year!"

"What?" Harry almost shouted. He took a second to calm himself before he continued. "But term starts on the first of September. That's the only thing that's kept me from going crazy! You don't know what it's like here. I have to go back to Hogwarts, I can't stand it here!"

"No, no, no, no!" cried the house-elf, shaking his head so rapidly it almost became a blur. "There is a plot, Harry Potter! A plot to make most terrible things happen!"

"What kind of things?" Harry asked. "Who is plotting them?"

Dobby covered his ears and shook his head, letting out a tiny squeak of fright.

"All right!" Harry said, holding his hands up. "I understand, you can't say. Does it have anything to do with Voldemort? You can just—"

Dobby stopped him with a terrified gasp. "You mustn't speak his name, Harry Potter!"

"All right! Does it have anything to do with You-Know-Who? You can just nod your head."

The house-elf paused and then shook his head, indicating that it did not. Harry was stumped.

"Then.... What is it?"

"Dobby cannot say, sir. Bad things are going to happen at Hogwarts this year!"

"Do you know who Albus Dumbledore is?"

Dobby nodded.

"Well, I don't see how anyone except Vol—I mean, You-Know-Who—could pull anything with him as headmaster."

"Albus Dumbledore is a great wizard, Harry Potter, yes.... But there are some types of magic that no... no decent wizard would...."

Dobby grabbed the lamp again and began to hit himself with it. His earsplitting yelps of pain were sure to bring Uncle Vernon upstairs. Harry wrestled the lamp away from Dobby and grabbed him by his pillow case.

"Dobby, stop it!" Harry commanded angrily and desperately.

"Dudley must've left his television on!" said Uncle Vernon loudly from downstairs. "Little tyke."

Harry cursed under his breath, opened his closet door, and shoved Dobby inside.

"Be quiet," Harry ordered.

Just as he shut the closet door, the door to his bedroom burst open. Uncle Vernon entered, appearing incensed.

"What the devil are you doing in here?" Uncle Vernon demanded through gritted teeth. "One more sound and you'll wish you'd never been born, boy!"

Uncle Vernon shut the door harshly. He did not slam it-the presence of the Masons stopped him. Harry scowled, wrenched open the door to the closet, and yanked Dobby out. Harry tossed him toward the bed. The little house-elf landed on his feet, looking up at Harry with those enormous eyes.

"Can't you see why I've got to go back?" said Harry. "It's the only place I belong, the only place I have friends; it's the only place I can eat a proper meal!"

"Friends? Friends who don't even write to Harry Potter?" Dobby asked slyly.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You've been stopping my letters?"

"Dobby has them here, sir," said the house-elf, producing a wad of envelopes.

Harry clenched his hands into fists and gave Dobby a deadly glare.

Dobby's ears drooped and he shrunk back toward the bed. "Harry Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby.... Dobby thought, if Harry Potter didn't get any letters from his friends.... Dobby thought he might not want to go back to Hogwarts, sir."

"Is that what you thought?" Harry whispered. He wanted to throttle the little elf for what he'd done. "I've been stuck here... alone for weeks. You cut me off from the only friends I have, Dobby."

"Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter, but Harry Potter must understand...."

"I don't care, Dobby," Harry snapped. "Give me my letters!"

"Harry Potter will have his letters... if he promises not to go back to Hogwarts."

"I'm going back, Dobby. You're not going to stop me."

"Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice...."

Harry sprang for the house-elf, but Dobby dodged just in time and made for the door. Dobby hopped up, twisted the handle, and ran out into the hall. Harry ran in pursuit, following Dobby downstairs. The house-elf led him into the kitchen. The Dursleys were in the lounge now. A large cake sat upon the dining room table for desert. Dobby sprinted for the table and snapped his fingers just as Harry reached him.

The cake lifted into the air and began to move toward the den.

"Dobby!" Harry hissed. "Dobby, stop it!"

"Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts School!"

Harry peeked around the wall to judge how far away the floating cake was from the Masons who were sitting on the love seat, facing away from the dining room. The Dursleys, unfortunately, sat across from them. A wide-eyed Dudley was watching the levitating cake draw ever closer as Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon continued to chat away with the Masons.

Harry turned his head back to Dobby.

"Dobby, drop the bloody cake!"

"Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!"

"All right!" Harry lied wildly. "All right! I won't go back."

Dobby looked at Harry questioningly. "Harry Potter may be trying to save himself from trouble here."

"Yes, Dobby! They will kill me if you do anytu9jg with that cake!"

"Harry Potter is lying about not going back to Hogwarts."

"Dobby-"

"A thousand apologies, Mr. Harry Potter, sir. Dobby has no choice."

The elf snapped his fingers and then disappeared with a loud crack. Harry turned to see into the den again just as Ms. Mason let out a shriek. Dobby had dropped the cake on her head.

Uncle Vernon gave Harry a death glare as the Masons turned to see him. Mrs. Mason was red in the face, clearly enraged.

"Er... sorry," said Harry.

Mrs. Mason shrieked incoherently, and, despite many apologies from the Dursleys about their nephew's mental instability, stormed out of the house. Uncle Vernon would not have his deal signed. Once the Masons were gone, all three Dursleys returned to the den. Harry stood there before them. Uncle Vernon's face had turned purple and the skin under his left eye was twitching sporadically. It gave him the look of a mad man. Aunt Petunia, in all of her unwarranted pride, had inclined her head a few degrees upward and was looking down her nose at Harry in a most scathing manner. Dudley's arms were crossed, an impish grin on his face.

"What—have—you—done—boy?" Uncle Vernon hissed in between gasps of rage.

"It wasn't me," said Harry.

Uncle Vernon grunted something incoherently and lunged at Harry.

Harry back stepped and ran into the kitchen. Aunt Petunia stopped him. Harry cursed his inability to get away as Uncle Vernon caught him, backed him up against the counter, and leaned in very close to his face.

"You will rue the day you were born, boy!" Uncle Vernon cried through gritted teeth. Spittle flew from his parted lips like venom. "HOW DARE YOU USE YOUR... YOUR ABNORMAL ABILITIES UNDER MY ROOF! I'LL NOT HAVE IT!"

He smacked Harry across the face, sending him to the floor.

At that moment, a large barn owl flew through the window and crashed into Uncle Vernon's head. It fell to the kitchen floor, dropped the letter it was carrying, excreted a bit on the tile, and then flew off. Aunt Petunia shrieked in horror. She was finally experiencing her personal apocalypse. Her immaculate kitchen floor was now soiled with owl droppings.

Harry, rubbing the sting on his face, picked up the letter and opened it. He was able to read it all before Uncle Vernon snatched it away.

It said:

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was performed at your place of residence at thirteen minutes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not allowed to use magic outside of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Any further use of magic on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, Paragraph C).

We would also like to remind you that any magical activity that risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offense under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statue of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays!

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

Uncle Vernon took the note from Harry's hands and read it quickly.

"You didn't tell us you weren't allowed to use magic outside of school, boy," said Uncle Vernon with a wicked smile. "Slipped your mind, did it?"

"That's right," said Harry.

The look on Dudley's face abruptly changed into a look of a moron's epiphany. It then twisted into an impish grin that was a pale reflection of his father's worst smile.

"Mummy," Dudley whined. "Harry threatened me with... you know. He was sneaking out of his cupboard and stealing food from the fridge! He made me let him keep the TV in his room!"

Aunt Petunia gasped as though Dudley had just revealed that he was a victim of some heinous crime.

"Oh, my poor, poor Diddykins!" she cried. She wrapped him in a loving embrace as Uncle Vernon shot Harry a nasty look that conveyed an unmistakable threat.

"Sneaking out of your cupboard at night, eh, boy?" Uncle Vernon growled.

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "Well, you can't blame me. You haven't been giving me much to eat."

Aunt Petunia made a small choking noise in the back of her throat. It sounded like a vocal expression of incredulity and shock.

"We took you into our home!" she cried indignantly. "You ought to be more grateful!"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Grateful because you neglected me and spoiled your fat son?"

Aunt Petunia gaped at him.

Uncle Vernon's face turned a nasty shade of red.

"IN YOUR ROOM, BOY! NOW!"

Harry didn't waste time to comply with the order. He went upstairs, slammed the door to his new bedroom, and flopped down on the bed. He couldn't remember ever being angrier at the Dursleys. He knew that life for him here was about to deteriorate, despite the fact that it was already atrocious. This was thanks, in no small part, to Dobby the house-elf.

Life did grow worse for Harry.

The next day, Uncle Vernon installed a chain lock on the outside of Harry's bedroom door and a cat flap which Harry discovered would be used as a means to provide him with food. The Dursleys didn't want to open his door. Uncle Vernon also paid a man to install bars on the outside of Harry's window that might have been wide enough to stick his leg through, or possibly Hedwig. Harry considered for a moment that he might be able to use his owl to send a letter before Uncle Vernon put a lock on the cage.

Harry was only let out of his room in the evenings to relieve himself. He supposed it must be better than being cramped in the cupboard. A week went by. Harry was fed next to nothing for a record three days. He was given only flat soda pop to drink. On the second day, Aunt Petunia's hand appeared through the cat flap to give him a mostly empty can of stone cold soup. Harry's insides had been aching with hunger, so he'd drunk it all down and felt guilty afterward for not giving any to Hedwig. He was fed enough on the fourth day that he could share with her, but not enough to sate his hunger. He was also given a glass of cold water that tasted like it'd been stagnant for a time.

For the next week or so, all Harry could think about was food and water. Everything else was pushed to the back of his mind. He dreamed of food in his sleep and day-dreamed about it while he was awake. Food was all he wanted.

His anger that the Dursleys came in flashes every now and again. He was sure they would starve him to death. Maybe the stupid house-elf had saved him from some danger at Hogwarts, but Dobby had condemned him to living in hell.

Eventually, Harry was fed enough to fill his belly. The night it happened was like heaven. Aunt Petunia had slipped an entire chicken breast through the cat flap. Harry had ravenously eaten almost all of it. He'd slipped was what was left through the bars in Hedwig's cage. She'd happily nibbled the remaining meat off of the bones.

That night, he was able to fully consider things. He needed to escape. This could not go on. There was no way the Dursleys would allow him to return to Hogwarts.

Harry was put to work the day after he'd been fed well enough. Uncle Vernon told him he must get a coat of paint on the entire house in two days, and that he must put a second coat on in two days after that. Harry worked the first day and got the front side of the house done. He knew he wasn't going to be finished on the second day, so he didn't even bother to try.

That was a huge mistake. At the end of the day, Uncle Vernon had led him inside by the hair and beat him on his rear with a cutting board. He'd shouted at Harry that he needed to learn discipline and the normal way of doing things. Harry didn't think it was normal to ask him to get both coats on the next day.

He finished the first coat and was exhausted when Uncle Vernon punished him again for not finishing the second one. He went to bed that night incredibly sore from the spankings with the cutting board. He was beyond exhausted the next day when Uncle Vernon demanded that he put on the second coat or else. Somehow, maybe by magic, Harry managed to get the second coat done.

Uncle Vernon had beaten him again and Harry had been sent to bed without any food again. He was still sore from his punishment the day before. The bruises had worsened over the day and Harry had a terrible migraine from being so hungry. He did something he'd never done before, that night. He cried himself to sleep. They were tears of both anger and anguish.

Yes, this is quite severe. But, in my mind, this indicates that the Dursleys are very much afraid of Harry. Much more so than in the books. That's my rationale for the abuse. Not to worry, of course. This last bit with the painting, I feel, was pivotal enough to make Harry a darker person in the long run. In other words, I'm quite finished writing actual child abuse. Not something I very much enjoy doing. Also, someone gave me such a kickass idea for Harry's 'escape'. But I've already had this worked out in such a way that I am not sure I can manage changing it. I am posting these two chapters, and have one more written. However, I sort of want to change it. Expect a delay in updating before you get the next chapter or so, and then updating should continue at a steadier pace.... I think this abuse is good enough to make Harry darker, but I need to do something else... I'm not sure, we'll see.

Chapter 18: Going Home

Harry soon recovered from the entire painting ordeal. Then came his time to rebel. The Dursleys, unfortunately, knew he wasn't allowed to use magic, so he couldn't even use their own stupidity and gullibility against them. He got back at them in his own, subtle ways. Occasionally, when Aunt Petunia declared herself too tired to cook breakfast, or something of the like, Harry was forced to do it. Oftentimes, he spit in the Dursleys' food. Other times, when Harry was forced to tend to Aunt Petunia's garden, he sprayed weed killer on the flowers. He tried to be cautious in his little acts of revenge. He didn't need to be punished severely again. If he was patient, he was sure he'd be able to pay them back in a much better way. A few of his punishments backfired and earned him days without food.

Harry was abandoned. There was no getting around that.

The date of the start of term at Hogwarts loomed ahead. Harry was sure the Dursleys would not let him go back. If he was unable to, Harry made a promise to himself that he would use magic against his foul relatives. He would get away from this horrible place. He could hardly stand it any longer. He felt so lonely sometimes. He'd known a better life at Hogwarts. Now that he was reliving the life he had left behind when he went to school, and it was much worse than before, he grew resentful. He hated Dobby the house-elf for cutting him off from his friends. He hated the Dursleys for starving him and forcing him to perform feats of ridiculous and unnecessary labor. They'd eased up on their beatings of him whenever he did wrong. Maybe that was because he took to screaming in order to get them to stop. Harry didn't like to have to scream. It was rather humiliating, but it was the only way to get the beating to stop. Aunt Petunia was frightened that the neighbors would hear.

Harry wondered why the Dursleys hated him so. He'd never done anything to them, at least not purposely. He wanted to now, of course. He to very much. But, he hadn't before. They hated him because he could use magic, and magic was obviously a thing they feared. Their fear made them cruel. All Muggles were like that, Harry thought. Even the children that bullied him in school when he was younger were like that. They didn't know he was a wizard, but they saw that his appearance was abnormal and Dudley had convinced them that Harry was a freak. Muggles hated anything different or rare or strange. Draco was right, indeed. Muggles were horrible,

stupid people that only wanted to harm wizards. They were prejudiced against people that were different. Harry had been treated rottenly by Muggles for his entire life. He hated them.

Harry's birthday came swiftly. For a gift, he was given food. Harry had also decided that this was the day he'd ask about Hogwarts. He thought he knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it spoken.

Aunt Petunia's hand shot through the cat flap sometime after the Dursleys had finished dinner on Harry's birthday. She placed a bowl of cold soup on the floor.

Harry jump off of his bed and ran to the door.

"Am I going to be allowed to go back to Hogwarts?" Harry asked before Aunt Petunia could retreat down the hall.

There was a short pause before she replied.

"No," she said simply. "You will not return to that freakish school of yours. We'll not have you learning any more about your abnormality."

Harry didn't say anything as she walked away. He had thought that they wouldn't let him go. He had been right.

He thought they must not want him learning any more magic in case he decided to use it against them. Harry couldn't do that, of course. The letter from the Ministry had prohibited it; even the Dursleys knew that. He'd be expelled from Hogwarts if he used magic outside of its walls. Hogwarts was his only home. He longed to return there again.

As he drank down his cold soup, he began to think of ways to get to Hogwarts.

Over the next week, he came up with an idea. It involved Hedwig. Unfortunately, she was still trapped inside her cage. Uncle Vernon had refused to take the lock off again for any reason whatsoever. Hedwig was a very unhappy owl these days. She didn't make a racket anymore because it did no good. She simply sat there, in a pile of her own filth. Harry needed to get her out. He had to open the lock.

If only he could use his magic. That one simple spell, Alohomora, would be invaluable to him. It was so simple. If only the laws of the Ministry were not blocking his way... Alas, he could not. The goal was to return to Hogwarts, not be kept away by the Dursleys and the Ministry. He couldn't go if the Ministry kept him away. All he could do was try to stop the Dursleys from doing so.

Harry began to search his room for something he could use to pick the lock. He found an old safety pin in the closet and tried that to no avail. In his desk, he found a paper clip and a hairpin. He was able to use a combination of those two things to finally disengage the lock two weeks later. Harry sighed in relief when he finally got it off at midnight one day, long after the Dursleys had gone to bed.

Harry realized he'd broken the lock and it would no longer close. It didn't matter, though.

Now, all he had to do was figure out a way to get Hedwig out of the house at night. He tried slipping her through the bars on his window, but she was just a bit too big. One night, he shoved her through the cat flap after the Dursleys had gone to bed and told her to go outside and come to his window.

He'd waited for a few minutes in wild anticipation. Moments later, Hedwig had appeared at his window and hooted. Harry had almost cheered. She must have gotten out through an open window downstairs somewhere, he thought.

He was too tired to do anything further that night. He told Hedwig to go hunting and come back tomorrow night.

The next morning, Harry had been punished for letting Hedwig out. Uncle Vernon promised him he'd get no food for two weeks now and gave him a hard few slaps across the face. Harry was sent to his room and he went with a smile. Uncle Vernon was frightened. He knew owls carried messages. He was afraid Harry had sent one. The house was quiet all day. Harry sat there in his room, staring at the calendar. Tomorrow was the day before term began. Harry hoped Hedwig would come back that night.

He sat waiting by the window on his chair after the Dursleys had gone to sleep. Hedwig would return, he knew. She was a smart owl. After all, she'd gotten out. Harry knew what he would have her do.

The Dursleys were frightened of magic. He needed someone that would frighten them into letting him go back to Hogwarts. Harry considered writing to Professor McGonagall, but he wasn't sure she would cut it this time. Her initial threats had obviously had no lasting effect. He needed someone more imposing, someone even he'd been scared of when he first met them.

Harry dug a quill and a piece of parchment out of his trunk. He realized that what was left of his ink from last year Hogwarts had gone bad. Luckily, he found an old Muggle pen in his desk that still worked. He began to write his message.

Dear Professor Snape,

The Dursleys have been terrible all summer. They locked Hedwig up so I couldn't write anyone. I managed to get her out. I need help. The Dursleys won't let me go back to Hogwarts. They won't let me eat and I can't use magic against them. They know I can't. I need your help.

Harry

Harry rolled the parchment up when he was finished and continued to wait for Hedwig. Sometime later, a scratching noise startled him. He thought he must have dozed off because his head was on the desk. He looked outside to see Hedwig sitting on the top of the bars outside his window. Harry opened the window and painstakingly tied the letter to Snape around Hedwig's leg. It was difficult to reach up through the bars. When he was finished, he stroked the lower part of her wing. It was the only part of her he could easily reach.

"Take this to Snape," said Harry. "Hurry, Hedwig, or they won't let me go back. I promise I'll give you a load of treats when I can go out and buy them. All right?"

Hedwig gave him a look that he interpreted to mean she understood. She flapped her wings and took off into the night. Harry watched her disappear into the darkness. She was his only hope of getting back to Hogwarts now.

The next day, the Dursleys did not let Harry out to relieve himself in the morning. He spent most of the day pacing his room, trying to ignore the hunger pangs and how dry his throat was. Every now and then, he looked out his window for Hedwig, or any sign of anything.

All day he waited, growing more nervous. Term began tomorrow. Something had to happen.

The Dursleys let him go to the bathroom after they ate dinner. Harry did so quickly and returned to sit by his window. He waited there, well into the night, his anticipation and hunger keeping him awake. The last thing Harry remembered before he fell asleep was a car driving by, though it was quite late.

Harry awoke with a start. It looked as though the streetlamp closest to Number 4, Privet Drive had just gone out. The disappearance of light must have woken him, he thought. He felt groggy and he had a wicked headache from hunger.

He straightened his glasses and took a better look out into the darkness. Another streetlight flickered out, then another. Harry watched them all of them die. Privet Drive was suddenly too dark to see. A minute or so after the last light had gone out, a knock sounded at the door.

Harry's heart started to beat at a quicker pace. Could it be that Snape had received his letter and finally come for him?

Another knock sounded, louder and more insistent than the first.

Harry heard Uncle Vernon stir down the hall and walk slowly downstairs as the knocking continued, muttering about the ridiculousness of such a situation.

Harry heard Uncle Vernon answer the door and grunt in surprise.

"See here!" Uncle Vernon cried. "I will not have this! OUT OF MY HOUSE AT ONCE!"

Harry didn't get to hear the reply of the person who'd knocked because Aunt Petunia and Dudley were stumbling down the hall

outside. Aunt Petunia shrieked a moment later. Harry listened as hard as he possibly could but heard nothing.

After a few moments, more footsteps sounded in the hall outside of his room. Dudley opened his door.

"Mum and dad want you downstairs, Potter," said Dudley. He looked rather pale.

Harry fixed him with a glare and almost ran down the hall to the top of the stairs. He took a deep breath and descended to find Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in a kind of stand off with Albus Dumbledore and Professor Snape. They stood before the closed front door. Dumbledore's normally kind face was turned down in a frown. Snape looked rather livid.

"Professor!" Harry cried, referring to both of them. He was so tired and hungry. He had such a pounding hunger headache. He wondered if this was just a dream.

Snape's attention turned to Harry; his eyes narrowed to slits. He turned and glared at Uncle Vernon so fiercely that Uncle Vernon took a step back.

"He's emaciated," Snape hissed in a venomous voice. "I realize that Muggles, such as yourselves, are inherently stupid. I, however, find it difficult to believe that you could accidentally neglect to feed Potter."

"This is my house," Uncle Vernon said. "I'll do what I want."

"When I left Harry in your care, I expected you to treat him as you would your own son," said Dumbledore. "I can see you have failed to do so."

"He's been nothing but trouble for us," said Aunt Petunia. "Him and his freakish abnormality! Threatening my poor baby boy with... with magic!"

"I doubt any threat Harry used against your son could constitute your criminal actions, Petunia," said Dumbledore.

"Especially considering the fact that you are, no doubt, aware that Potter is not allowed to use magic outside of school," Snape added.

"Severus is quite right," said Dumbledore. "I am very disappointed in both of you. You have failed to do as I asked. I find it sad that both of you are content to abuse Harry. He does not deserve any of it."

"I am disgusted," said Snape. He drew his wand and aimed it straight at Uncle Vernon. "I have half a mind to do more than merely threaten you with magic, Dursley."

Uncle Vernon's face reddened. "Now, see here! If you do not leave my house this instant, I shall phone the police!"

"Please do so," said Snape. "It is, regrettably, illegal to use magic against Muggles, especially the kind I wish to use upon you. Kindly phone your pathetic law enforcement. They'll have you booked in a filthy Muggle prison before morning. What you've done to Potter is clearly child abuse."

None of the Dursleys said anything.

"We will be taking Harry to Hogwarts tonight," said Dumbledore.

Harry's heart lifted.

"Kindly refrain from opposing us in any way," Dumbledore continued, "or I shall phone the Muggle police."

"I'm considering it regardless of whether or not you oppose us," said Snape dangerously. "Not only have you abused Potter, but look at what you've done to your own son."

Snape indicated Dudley who was halfway down the stairs behind Harry.

"Your child is morbidly obese."

Uncle Vernon, who was quite fat himself, flushed a horrible shade of crimson. "HOW DARE YOU, SIR! You have no right to come in to my house, accuse me of-

Snape aimed his wand a little higher. "Mark my words, Dursley, I have every right. Even your pathetic mind can comprehend the fact that magic makes me better than you."

Snape looked to Aunt Petunia. She met his eyes for a moment before she had to look away.

"You," he said to her. "Always the jealous girl, forever whining at how bitterly unfair it was that your sister had magical abilities and you did not."

Aunt Petunia flushed. Harry stared at her incredulously.

"Your sister was a thousand times the person you are, Petunia," Snape spat. "You shame her memory and you abuse her son."

Aunt Petunia scowled at him. "I always knew you were a bad one, Severus. I told her so many times, but you made her what she was! Afreak! If it wasn't for-"

Snape aimed his wand at her, silencing her immediately.

"Don't you dare speak of Lily Potter in that manner," said Snape.

Dumbledore put a hand on Snape's arm and gently lowered it. "That's enough, Severus," said the headmaster. "Harry, if you'll just come with us now, we'll take you to Hogwarts."

"But, what about my things, sir?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore waved his wand. Harry heard several pops sound from upstairs.

"Already taken care of, Harry," said Dumbledore with a small smile.

"Where's Hedwig?"

"Your owl delivered your message to me an hour ago, Potter," said Snape. "She is resting in the Owlrey."

"A message?" Uncle Vernon cried. "I knew it! You brought these two... freaks here? I ought-"

"You ought to consider your actions more carefully in the future, Mr. Dursley," said Dumbledore. "You're very lucky that I do not press charges in the wizarding realm against this type of behavior."

Uncle Vernon paled at the obvious threat. Though Dumbledore had said the words kindly enough, there was no mistaking the seriousness in his voice.

"Well, we shall be off," said Dumbledore. "Come along, Harry."

Harry descended the last step and walked to Dumbledore's side. Snape stood a few feet away, wand clutched at his side.

"Mark me, Dursley," said Snape. "If ever I find you've mistreated Potter this badly again, you will spend the rest of your life as a filthy, diseased rat. You should thank me for being so generous. At least that would not be painful. Besides, a rat is what you are already."

Uncle Vernon did not thank Snape. The potions master turned with a sweep of his cloak and strode out the door. Dumbledore and Harry followed.

The moment the rather chilly night air hit Harry's face, his spirits rose to a height they hadn't been all summer. He was going back to Hogwarts. He was going home.

I believe this should fully explain how Snape sees Harry. He sees him much more as Lily's child, not simply James's. Also, this will provide for an interesting discussion between Harry and/or Snape and Dumbledore. Sorry for the delay in updating, combination of my having stuff to do and FFN NOT WORKING! Next chapter will come sooner.

Chapter 19: Term Begins

Harry followed Dumbledore and Snape outside. It was pitch black. Privet Drive was completely dark. Harry heard one of the Dursleys slam the door behind them. The lights in the house died soon after. Dumbledore spoke.

"All right, Harry. If you would, please take my arm. Severus, I've suspended the enchantments. My office."

Snape said nothing.

Harry took Dumbledore's arm and was immediately assaulted by the familiar, albeit unpleasant sensation of Side-Along Apparition. Once again, Harry felt as though if he was being squeezed through a narrow tube. His insides were compacting, his ribs were crushing his lungs, making it impossible to draw a breath. His head was invaded by a pressure so fierce that it felt as though it might explode, or, at the very least, his eyeballs would surely fly out of their sockets.

The sensation ended quickly enough. Harry found himself standing in a peculiar, round room, full of an odd assortment of magical devices Harry had never seen before. Many were silver in color and emitted puffs of smoke at regular intervals. Those sat on spindly-legged tables.

The walls were lined with portraits of old witches and wizards, all of whom appeared to be sleeping. Several windows looked out onto the grounds of Hogwarts. One provided an exquisite view of the mountains surrounding the castle. Also, Harry could see what appeared to be the outline of the Quidditch Pitch in the darkness.

Dumbledore took a seat at the large, claw-footed, brightly polished desk standing before Harry. It was cluttered with books and other strange objects. A large ink bottle sat near Dumbledore's hand, along with a handsome, scarlet quill. Harry took a quick turn to see the large oak door that was apparently the exit to the place. Beside it stood a large, golden perch, upon which sat a large, crimson bird, gazing at him thoughtfully-if the gaze of a bird could be described as thoughtful.

Harry looked away from Dumbledore who was now seated quite comfortably in the large, high-backed chair behind the claw-footed desk. Snape stood in the darkness near the wall.

"Welcome to my office, Harry," said Dumbledore warmly. "I'm sorry you could not be here under more pleasant circumstances. Of course, one rarely enters the office of the headmaster unless circumstances are unpleasant."

"I'm just glad to be back, sir," said Harry.

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "I am very sorry for the way you were treated, Harry. Rest assured, it will not happen again."

"You mean I won't have to go back next summer?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry," said Dumbledore gravely. "I am afraid you will have to return to the Dursleys house every summer until you are of age."

Harry felt a twinge of fury which ignited a small explosion of pain from the hunger headache he already had. "But they didn't feed me! My uncle made me paint the entire house and he hit me with a cutting board because I couldn't do it all in one day!"

"I'm very sorry, Harry. I did not mean for you to be put in to that position. I will ensure a closer eye is kept on you when you are with your relatives. Nevertheless, you must go back."

"But why, sir?" Harry asked.

"That discussion, Harry, is for another time. Right now, it is very late. Term begins tomorrow. I suggest you go to your dormitory and get some sleep. I am sure you are hungry, I can arrange for some food to be brought to you. You will find that your trunk and all your belongings are in your dormitory now, along with the necessary books you require for your second year. I sent an order to Flourish and Blotts myself today. The books you require for Defense Against the Dark Arts were in my personal possession. I must admit, I was rather curious to read them.... I read them all quite swiftly, of course, and found them to be interesting. Now, Harry, I suggest you go and sleep. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," said Harry, but he wasn't going to be deterred. He couldn't believe what Dumbledore told him. He would not have it. He would never go back. "But, Professor, why-"

Dumbledore held his hands up for silence and looked sadly down at his desk. Harry thought the fury he felt must have crept onto his face because of the way Dumbledore looked at him when he spoke.

"Harry, if I tell you the reason your must return to the Dursleys, will you please calm yourself and get some rest?"

"All right," Harry agreed uncertainly.

"Do you remember what happened down in the chambers of the Philosopher's Stone?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Harry demanded. He had a pounding headache and was not in the mood for any attempts of... what could only really be considered subterfuge on Dumbledore's part.

"I am trying to explain it so you will understand the significance," said Dumbledore patiently. "Do you remember when Professor Quirrel touched you and his hand was burned?"

"Yes."

"I told you that protection came from your mother, did I not?"

"Yes," Harry said tersely. He wanted Dumbledore to get to the point.

"Harry, you must understand that magic works in peculiar ways. You have to accept what I am telling you. Can you do that?"

"I don't know, sir," said Harry honestly. Dumbledore could simply be lying in order to get him to return to the Dursleys for any number of reasons. Harry hated them and never wanted to return, but Dumbledore was insisting. Harry knew the headmaster was a bit crazy, but he'd never seen Dumbledore as cruel. Dumbledore's words seemed to indicate otherwise. Why would he want to send Harry back to a place where he was abused? Was he really so insane that he could not see that the Dursleys would simply continue. They were stupid Muggles. They'd forgotten McGonagall's warning

and McGonagall had been very clear. Dumbledore had even warned them before McGonagall had. At least, that had been Harry's impression when the headmaster and Snape had come to retrieve him. If the Dursleys had ignored or forgotten those warnings, why should this time be any different? It would be worse when Harry went back. Dumbledore must see this. Yet, the headmaster chose to condemn him in spite of convincing evidence. Harry could not understand it.

"Harry, your Aunt Petunia is your mother's sister; this you know. She shares blood with Lily Potter, and, therefore, the protection your mother invoked with her sacrifice also resides with Petunia. You must return to the house of your aunt and uncle every year, at least once, for that protection to be renewed. Do you understand, Harry?"

"No," Harry replied angrily. "I don't understand. Voldemort is dead!"

"I'm afraid that may not be entirely true, Harry. Voldemort was supposedly 'dead' when his own Killing Curse rebounded off of you and 'killed' him nearly twelve years ago. Yet, you saw him in the chambers of the Philosopher's Stone last year, did you not?"

"Yeah...." Harry trailed off.

"So it is better to be safe, Harry. You must return to the Dursleys' house for your own protection."

"I must return there so they can hurt me instead of Voldemort?" Harry snapped.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I promise you that will not happen again, Harry. I would never knowingly put you into a dangerous situation. You must understand this. You simply have to return. Perhaps you can stay at a friend's house for the duration of the summer after you have spent time with your relatives?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "How much time do I have to spend with them?"

"I'm not entirely sure, Harry."

"Professor, you can't make me go back. I won't."

Dumbledore sighed. "I am afraid I must, Harry. This is a terrible dilemma, but I am trying to protect you from a greater evil. You must see this."

"I don't," said Harry. "If I could only be allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts, they wouldn't touch me."

"Harry, you must trust me. I am very old and I like to think that I am very wise. I know how to ensure your safety. If you wish it, your relatives will not interact with you except to hand you your meals, which, I assure you, will be full, proper meals."

"That is ridiculous," Harry snapped.

"I know it must seem that way, but you must trust that I know what I am doing, Harry. I realize this might be difficult. I cannot imagine how you must be feeling right now. But, you are here now and you really must be going to sleep, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I will send some food down to your dormitory for you to eat before you do."

"Fine," said Harry, giving up on the subject of the Dursleys. Dumbledore wasn't going to talk about it anymore and Harry was famished. Dumbledore was right about one thing. For the moment, Harry was home. He wouldn't have to deal with the Dursleys for a long time now. He had the better part of an entire year to figure out ways to avoid returning to their home.

"Have a pleasant evening, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry said nothing in return, he was far too angry with Dumbledore.

"I shall escort Potter to the dungeons," Snape announced. Harry had almost forgotten he was there. He'd remained silent the entire time.

"Very well, Severus," said Dumbledore. It sounded like he was giving Snape permission to leave. "Have a pleasant evening."

"You as well, headmaster," Snape said curtly. "Follow me, Potter."

Harry did as Snape said and followed the potions master through the large oak door leading out of the Headmaster's Office. It led to a narrow, spiral staircase which Harry and Snape descended. They emerged in a hall on the seventh floor. Snape began down the

corridor, heading in the general direction of the Grand Staircase. Harry started and spun at the sound of stone grinding together. A bit surprised, he watched a stone gargoyle jump into position before the entrance to the staircase that led to Dumbledore's office.

The surprise evaporated quickly because Harry was already used to such peculiarities regarding magic. He picked up the pace to walk next to Snape. They were both silent as they traversed the corridors of the seventh floor. Harry looked all around himself at the stone walls of Hogwarts; the tapestries here and there; the portraits; the long, dark windows; the suits of armor. He'd experienced long bouts of nostalgia over the summer from being away from the school. That feeling was gone now, replaced by a sense of belonging. He truly was home.

Only when Harry and Snape reached the Grand Staircase did Harry remember there was something he wanted to ask Snape.

"Sir," said Harry. "Did you know my mum?"

"Yes," said Snape simply.

"Was..." Harry trailed off; he no longer wanted to refer to his mother's sister as 'Aunt Petunia'. She was no aunt to him; she never had been. "Was... Petunia really jealous that my mum had magic and she didn't?"

Snape gestured for Harry to step on a passing staircase, he quickly did. As they continued to descend, Snape answered his question.

"Yes, she was quite jealous at first," said Snape. "Then she resented your mother and magic."

Snape sounded angry.

What he'd said, however, made sense to Harry. Petunia had been jealous of his mother's magical ability. She was now jealous of his. Because of that jealousy, she did terrible things to Harry. She'd either passed on her hatred of magic to Harry's 'uncle' Vernon, or else reaffirmed that it was to be hated in his company. Idiot Muggles, Harry thought. They didn't understand. Magic was not something to be hated or feared, but it certainly did make wizards better. Muggles

ought to be jealous, but Harry ought not to be treated so poorly by them. Harry hated them.

"Sir..." said Harry, not wanting to think about the Dursleys anymore. "What was my mum like?"

"She was one of the best people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing," Snape replied rather distantly.

Harry thought about this for a moment. He wished he'd known his mother. But Voldemort had taken that away from him and doomed him to live with the Dursleys. If not for Voldemort, none of this would have happened to him. Harry felt a renewed anger, this time at the Dark Lord. Harry wished he was strong enough to make Voldemort pay for taking away the only people in the world that had ever loved him.

"What about my dad?" Harry asked of Snape.

Snape's reply was several degrees cooler. "Yes, I knew your father," he said.

"What was he like?"

"Arrogant, lazy, egotistical. The typical Gryffindor."

"My dad was in Gryffindor?" Harry asked incredulously, ignoring the insults Snape had used.

"Indeed. Your mother was as well."

"I never knew..." said Harry.

"In the end, your parents were good people, Potter," said Snape after a long, almost reluctant pause. He sounded as though he'd just remembered something.

"Professor..." Harry trailed off as they reached the Entrance Hall.

Snape didn't prod. He seemed to be deep in thought now. Harry was thinking too, as much as the headache allowed.

"Professor, why is Dumbledore going to make me go back to the Dursleys?"

"The headmaster as already explained that to you," Snape replied crisply, although he did not sound very glad about Dumbledore's decision. "I'm sure that your relatives will no longer give you any trouble. Petunia remembers me and she remembers the headmaster. She is well aware that we are both capable of magic beyond her wildest dreams."

"But it's illegal to use magic against a Muggle."

"And yet Petunia fears it greatly. Besides, there are other ways to ensure those Muggles do nothing. They could be confined to a single room of their house, simply by a few words."

"But-"

"Enough of this, Potter. It is late and you must rest."

Harry realized they now stood before the bare, dungeon wall that led in to the Slytherin common room.

"Pureblood," said Snape.

That must have been the password because the wall opened to admit Harry into the common room. The Slytherin common room, and probably all the other common rooms in Hogwarts, required a password to enter. Harry was about to bid Snape goodnight before he realized the potion's master was no longer standing by him.

Harry shook his head and entered the empty common room. He was beyond glad to be in it again. He headed down to the dormitory that he, Draco, Blaise, Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle shared during the school year. He thought about what Snape had said on the way down. When he arrived in the dormitory, he found that all of the beds except his were bare. His trunk lay at the foot of his bed. Upon it sat a plate of steaming, roasted chicken, potatoes, a glass of pumpkin juice, and another plate with two treacle tarts. Next to that sat a large stack of books that Harry thought must be what he required for this year. Next to the books sat Hedwig in her cage. It was clean now, Harry saw, and she looked content inside of it.

Harry spotted a jar of owl treats lying near her cage. He picked three out and gave them all to Hedwig before he ate his food. He opened the door to the cage and stroked her head. Harry smiled at her.

"Thank you, Hedwig," he said. "You saved me."

Hedwig fixed him with a look that Harry could not really interpret. She hooted once and nuzzled his hand. Harry smiled.

"You're probably still hungry. I'll let you out to hunt tomorrow, okay?"

Hedwig hooted an affirmative and then buried her head under her wing. Harry thought she must be tired. He immediately seized the plate with the chicken, sat on the floor, and sat the plate in his lap. Then he ravenously consumed the first real dinner he'd had in a long time. It was the best thing he'd ever eaten. He gulped down all his pumpkin juice and devoured the two treacle tarts. He loved those.

When he was finished, Harry set the plate back down, and nearly knocked over a small bottle that he hadn't noticed was sitting next to the books. He picked it up and looked at the label. Apparently, this was a potion for dreamless sleep. Harry thought he'd seen something like it on the table next to his bedside when he woke up in the Hospital Wing after his ordeal with the Philosopher's Stone.

This was good, Harry thought. He was exhausted now and his headache was slowly receding now that his stomach was full. However, it was difficult to sleep on a full stomach, so Harry pulled the stopper on the bottle out and drank the entire thing down. Almost immediately, he began to feel the effects. He stripped off all of his Muggle clothes, but then became too tired to dig in his trunk for pajamas. He fell asleep in his bed in nothing but his undergarments; his sleep was sound and dreamless.

Harry awoke the next morning, groggy, and still exhausted. Luckily, he no longer had a pounding headache, but his stomach rumbled immediately. Beyond ecstatic to be in Hogwarts again, a place where he could easily obtain a proper breakfast, Harry hopped out of bed, changed into some robes, and made his way to the Great Hall.

He found the place full of most of the staff, all sitting behind the regular staff table which, right now, was the only table present.

Snape had not arrived yet, Harry could see. Harry noticed Dumbledore was sitting comfortably at the high-backed headmaster's chair, and he felt more than a little bit of irritation upon seeing the man.

He tried to suppress it as he noticed Professor McGonagall gesture for him. He approached her. She sat next to Dumbledore, and next to her was a very large, empty seat that Hagrid sometimes occupied. Hagrid was nowhere to be seen either.

"Welcome back early, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall. "I am sure you do not wish to speak of your ordeal, therefore I will only say I was horribly aggrieved to hear what happened. I do hope you are all right now."

"I am, Professor," said Harry. He felt Dumbledore's eyes upon him, as well as the eyes of several other staff members, but he ignored them.

"Very good. I am glad to hear it. Now, you may take Hagrid's seat if you wish. The House Tables aren't normally put in place until the night of the feast. Hagrid will not be joining us for breakfast this morning."

"All right," said Harry.

So he took Hagrid's seat and imagined he looked ridiculous in it. He was so small and thin. Hagrid was so large and broad and so was his chair. Harry couldn't help but smile a little at the thought of it as he ate breakfast. It was the best breakfast he'd ever had. He had about three helpings of everything on the table. The staff chattered around him about the start of term and the impending arrival of students. Only McGonagall and Professor Sprout, who was also nearby, spoke to him. Every other Professor seemed to think it was simply best to let him be. Harry appreciated that. He didn't want the condolences of the entire staff.

Dumbledore never spoke a word to Harry. Harry was also grateful for that. He didn't think he could stand having a polite conversation with the headmaster now. He was still far too angry with the man.

For the rest of the day, Harry mostly stayed in his dormitory. He read the first the first chapter of his Transfiguration textbook, as well as

his Potions and Charms books. He thought he ought to be prepared. He hadn't been able to read over the summer. The Dursleys had set him back. He'd wanted to be further into his books. He liked learning about magic. He'd missed it a lot.

Harry noticed that the books by Gilderoy Lockhart did not appear to be textbooks at all. In fact, they all seemed to be works of fiction, although they were presented as true accounts by the writer. Harry thought the premises of all of Lockhart's books were completely ridiculous. He highly doubted that one man was capable of all of the deeds described just in the summaries on the books. He couldn't imagine how fantastically ludicrous the content of their pages must be. Harry wondered why second years required all of them this year.

After lunch, the rest of the day went by quickly. When the time came for students to arrive, Harry trekked out of the dungeons and into the Entrance Hall. He was greeted by the sight of many students led by Hagrid, heading toward the Great Hall. Harry slipped in amongst the throng unnoticed, and made his way to the Slytherin table. The staff table was full except for McGonagall, who'd be guiding first years.

Harry took his usual spot at the Slytherin table and waited patiently by his empty plate for Draco and Blaise.

Harry saw them enter the Great Hall. They were accompanied by, to Harry's irritation, Crabbe and Goyle.

Crabbe and Goyle were picking on some of the weaker looking second years, including Neville Longbottom. Harry wondered why Draco would be associating with them now. They all made their way to where Harry sat. Several Slytherins sniggered at the sight of Crabbe and Goyle. Harry smiled. They hadn't forgotten his revenge last year.

Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle took a seat before Harry. Blaise sat next to him.

"Where have you been, Potter?" Draco immediately demanded.

"We didn't see you on the Express," said Blaise.

"Yeah Potter," echoed Crabbe or Goyle.

Harry fixed them with a venomous look before turning back to speak to Draco and Blaise.

"It's a long story. I-"

He was interrupted at that moment by the doors of the Great Hall flying open. The room instantly fell silent as Professor McGonagall led a long line of nervous looking first years in. They all gazed wide-eyed at the vastness of the Great Hall, transfixed by the enchanted ceiling which displayed a starry night sky, and with all the floating candles.

McGonagall led them to a small stool situated before the staff table. Upon it sat the raggedy old Sorting Hat.

"When I call your name," McGonagall said to the first years, "you will come and sit down to be sorted."

The first years exchanged looks and some of them whispered nervously. Harry shook his head. He couldn't believe he'd been one of them last year.

A collective gasp issued from the first years when the Sorting Hat twitched and the rip at its brim opened wide, like a mouth.

It began to sing:

"Hello students, new and old!

Welcome first years!

Put me on and you'll be told

Where you ought to be

I can safely say that you'll never find

A hat as smart as me

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I know the Founders' tests

Put me on and I will see

Where you fit the best

You might belong in Gryffindor

Where dwell those with courage and pride

If you become a noble lion, your heart will be your guide

You might be one of Ravenclaw

Where those with sharp minds dwell

If you become a clever eagle, intelligence serves you well

Perhaps you will be put in Hufflepuff

Where they are hardy and loyal

You'll go far with a bit of work and toil

Or perhaps you fit in Slytherin

Where all the ambitious young ones go

With your sharp and cunning mind, you'll always beat your foe

Remember, though that friendship will serve you best

So don't keep only to your house, make peace with all the rest

One day soon, you might need a courageous, smart, hardy, or clever friend

Trust in one another, and you'll make it to the end

Now put me on and I shall decide

In which house it is that you'll reside!"

The collective student body clapped as the hat finished its song. Harry thought it rather short and too wordy. It was nothing he hadn't

heard before. The Sorting Hat's song last year had been much longer in his memory, although it hadn't said anything about friends. Maybe it was trying to give advice now? Harry thought it ought to say something about not trusting bloody Muggles.

The sorting began. It was a rather boring affair. Harry didn't really know any of the younger students. He recognized a few surname-specifically Weasley. Ron Weasley's young sister Ginny was predictably sorted into Gryffindor. Harry watched her take a seat next to Ron and Hermione.

Hermione smiled at him a little from across the Hall. Harry nodded a bit in her direction. He didn't mind Hermione. She might be a mudblood, a know-it-all, and a Gryffindor, but she was all right.

When the sorting was finished, Professor McGonagall magicked the stool away and took the Sorting Hat. Dumbledore stood to make his customary little speech. Harry scowled.

"To our new students: welcome! To our old students: welcome back! I hope you are all ready for another exciting year at Hogwarts! Before we eat, I would like to announce a new addition to our staff. Please give a warm welcome to Professor Gilderoy Lockhart who kindly agreed to assume the Defense Against the Dark Arts post."

Harry almost laughed. A man with wavy, golden locks, wearing golden robes and an impeccably white smile stood up and bowed. Many of the girls sighed longingly. Draco actually did laugh. Harry knew immediately that their new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was the man who wrote all those books. His attitude was incredibly pompous, just like his writings.

He sat down again and Dumbledore led everyone in applauding. Lockhart smiled and tried to act humble about it all. Several of the female students stood to their feet to give him a standing ovation. Harry rolled his eyes at this. Finally, Dumbledore quieted them all down.

"Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has asked me to remind you of several things. No one is to track mud in the halls from the grounds, especially on purpose, and no magic is to be used in the corridors between classes. Also, the forest at the edge of the grounds is forbidden to all students." Dumbledore's eyes traveled to the

Weasley twins who both whistled innocently. Dumbledore continued: "Quidditch tryouts will be held in the second week of term. Anyone interested in playing should speak to Madam Hooch. I believe that is it. So, let us all—what is the phrase?—dig in!"

The food appeared before them all. It was just as plentiful and delicious as Harry remembered. Several of the first jumped at the sudden appearance of the feast. After getting over their initial shock, they began to eat with astonished enthusiasm.

Draco and Blaise began to question Harry, then. They first asked him why he hadn't answered any of their letters. Harry, first of all, told them he hadn't received any. He did not, however, specify the reason why. He had no desire to talk about the maddeningly little house-elf Dobby. He told them some of what the Dursleys had done. He didn't specify or give many details. He didn't want to. He spoke only of the bare essentials.

Draco and Blaise were, predictably, very shocked and their anger matched Harry's own. Draco said that he'd known something was wrong and he'd tried to tell his father but Lucius Malfoy had apparently been too busy to listen. Harry thanked him for the attempt anyway, but told them it was over now, and he'd rather not discuss it anymore.

They dropped the subject and moved on to Gilderoy Lockhart when Harry brought up the ridiculous amount of books they were required to have. All of them were authored by Lockhart, and none of them seemed to relate to teaching.

"Yeah," said Blaise. "Lockhart's famous in the wizarding world. As famous as you, Potter."

"Really?" Harry asked, looking at the man. Harry had almost forgotten that he was famous. He attempted to forget at the moment he remembered, though, because that made him think about why he'd ended up with the Dursleys.

"Yes," said Draco. "Every bloody witch in Britain is swooning over him."

"Why?" Harry asked. He could sort of see that women might find Lockhart somewhat attractive, but the man's attitude was very pompous and egotistical.

"Because of those bloody books of his," said Blaise.

"What? Do people actually believe those?" Harry asked.

"Yes," said Draco.

Harry laughed aloud. "All I read were the summaries of two of them. One person couldn't do all that."

"Of course not," Draco snapped. "He's a fraud, Potter. My father's said it for ages."

Harry could believe that. Fleetinglly, he wondered why Dumbledore had hired Lockhart. He used this thought as another piece of evidence to support the theory that Dumbledore was insane. At first, Harry had found Dumbledore's craziness to be rather amusing. Now, he found it quite infuriating for one reason in particular.

Dumbledore stood, then, as the feast ended.

"Well," he began, "now that we are all fed and watered, I believe it is time for bed! Before we go, however, let us all sing the school song!"

Harry and every student that was not a first year groaned.

Dumbledore began to conduct them as the collective student body, save most of the Slytherins, including Harry, launched into a grudging and then rousing rendition of the Hogwarts School Song. Fred and George Weasley sang over the chorus of voices in a rather nasty, hard-rock tune.

The song ended quickly. Dumbledore bade them all goodnight again.

Harry, Draco, and Blaise made their way to their dormitory. Crabbe and Goyle trailed several paces behind them. Harry was under the impression that Draco had hired them as body guards or something. He didn't say anything about it though. He was actually quite tired and, interestingly enough, he was looking forward to the beginning of term tomorrow.

Chapter 20: Defense Against the Evident Ineptness of Gilderoy Lockhart

Lessons began the next day. After obtaining their schedules from a rather irritated Professor McGonagall outside of the Great Hall, Harry, Draco and Blaise entered and took their normal seats. Crabbe and Goyle followed in their wake. Harry was making a conscious effort to ignore them. He'd asked Draco about why exactly those two were tailing them, and Draco had said something about it be a good 'insurance policy'. Harry had rolled his eyes at that. He did not like the fact that Draco was employing what seemed to be body guards. After all, that was what Crabbe and Goyle were. Otherwise, they were merely an embellishment to Draco's already imposing presence. He was using them to inflict what amounted to terror on some of the younger looking first years. Harry thought it was a waste time to do such things. He had no interest in bullying first years. Not even Gryffindors, for that matter. He found it boring and he liked keeping to himself more.

They ate breakfast, mostly in silence. They were interrupted half way through by a chorus of gasps as Gilderoy Lockhart, clad in outrageously pompous golden robes, entered the Great Hall. He strutted like royalty down the middle of the Hall, headed for the staff table. The gasps, of course, all came from the throats of bedazzled girls that simply could not get enough of him. Harry found that more irritating than even Crabbe and Goyle. It didn't take much effort to look at the summaries of Lockhart's book. Anyone in their right mind could surely see that they were fiction. There was no possible way that someone like Lockhart, with all of his haughtiness and glamor, had actually conquered whatever the Wagga Wagga Werewolf was. People were idiots, thought Harry. The collective student body was composed of twits. It was nice that none of the Slytherin girls were gushing over Lockhart. Harry appreciated the fact that he was in a house that only accepted certain types of people because, as intelligent as even the Ravenclaws were, they could not see through Lockhart's painfully obvious lies.

After breakfast came Transfiguration. McGonagall seemed to be in a foul mood. Harry thought he knew why after a short way into the lesson. The Weasley twins had pulled some idiot prank in the Gryffindor common room last night. This was made obvious because Ron sniggered a little when McGonagall pronounced a very odd-sounding incantation and told them they would be learning it

near the end of the year. McGonagall figuratively exploded when she heard Ron's quiet laughing. She yelled at him for five straight minutes about exactly why the spell with the funny incantation was not comical at all. She finished by saying that she supposed he thought what his brothers had done to the common room was hilarious as well. Thus, it was obvious the Weasley twins had, in fact, done something. Harry found it amusing.

He did not, however, find it amusing when McGonagall told them to read the theory on transfiguring beetles in to buttons for homework. Harry hadn't read that far in the book yet. McGonagall informed them that they would only be skimming over the few chapters Harry had read. Harry groaned inwardly at this and made a commitment to do a bit of extra reading tonight.

Luckily, Flitwick was kind enough to not assign them any homework in Charms. However, the first lesson that day was quite dull, as opposed to Transfiguration's first lesson. Flitwick lectured them for the entire period on a theory Harry still didn't understand. He had even read about it in the book ahead of time. Flitwick tried to explain it in layman's terms, but it was still impossible to comprehend. The tiny professor assured them that they would fully understand the theory once they performed the charm in a matter of a week or two.

After that came Herbology in which things became more interesting. Professor Sprout began the year with a lesson on mandrakes. As she led the class to Greenhouse Three, she informed them that they would be overseeing the growth of mandrakes this year. Neville Longbottom looked positively ecstatic. Harry felt neutral about this, until he found out what a mandrake really was.

The class gathered around a long table, used for holding plants, that had been cleared within the humid greenhouse. Harry stood next to Draco and Blaise. Hermione and Neville stood across from him. Harry couldn't see Ron Weasley. He was glad for that. He wasn't fond of him.

Professor Sprout brought a small potted plant over to the table and set it down.

"Right," she said. "This, students, is a mandrake. It's quite young now, but it's already getting too big for this pot. Today, you will be

transplanting your mandrakes. Before I demonstrate, can anyone tell me why we require ear protection?"

Hermione's hand instantly shot up. Her elbow caught Neville under the chin but she didn't seem to notice. Harry and several of the Slytherins sniggered. Neville's cheeks reddened.

"Yes, Ms. Granger?" said Sprout.

"Mandrakes, or Mandragora, are curious plants. Their roots are a prime ingredient in many different types of antidotes. The reason we need ear protection, Professor, is because the cry of a mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it."

"Excellent, Ms. Granger!" cried Sprout. "Five points to Gryffindor! Ms. Granger is right. The cry of a mandrake is fatal; that's why I've given you each a pair of enchanted earmuffs. These mandrakes are young, so their cries won't kill you yet. We need to exercise caution, though. The cries of young mandrakes have been known to cause fainting, vomiting, deafness, blindness, bowel failure, and, in some cases, paralysis. Now, everyone put on your earmuffs and I will demonstrate the proper technique."

Everyone began to fuss with their earmuffs, coaxing them into the proper position so that they completely covered their ears. Harry knew that he didn't want to suffer any of the afflictions that Professor Sprout had just described. He was sure that nobody else wanted to be stricken with them either.

"Make sure they're on nice and tight!" Sprout advised them; she had to shout in order to make herself heard. Once she was satisfied that everyone's hearing was adequately protected, she grabbed a new pot, larger than the one housing the mandrake, as well as a small sack of soil from a shop Harry thought might have been in Diagon Alley.

"Grasp the mandrake firmly at its base," Sprout instructed, grabbing the plant at its thick stalk beneath all of the leaves. "Give it a good tug! Make sure you don't snap it!"

Sprout demonstrated her instructions and pulled free a mandrake from her pot. Clumps of dirt fell off the roots and onto the table, revealing what looked like the ugliest baby Harry had ever laid eyes

upon. Out of its head grew the stalk that Professor Sprout had pulled and out of all of its extremities grew tiny little roots. Its fingers and toes were horribly misshapen. Those, too, were roots. The entire thing was a sickly pale color.

It hung in the air and was very still for a moment. Then it gave a tiny little shiver, opened its mouth, and emitted a high-pitched wail, the likes of which Harry had never heard before. It was like a siren. Even the earmuffs didn't block it all out. Harry felt his hands automatically attempt to clamp his earmuffs closer to his ears.

Sprout seemed unperturbed by the noise. Swiftly, but gently, she dropped the mandrake into the empty pot, magicked the bag of soil into the air, and dumped enough in the new pot to fully cover the mandrake.

"Make sure the head of the mandrake's roots lie just below the surface of the soil!" Sprout said loudly, gently packing the dirt down. "They don't like to be in the open air very long-chills them badly. So, the quicker you can get them into their new homes, the better! Off you go! Nobody remove your earmuffs till the end of class. There ought to be enough mandrakes for you all to transplant one of your own."

Harry groaned as he grabbed a potted mandrake, an empty pot, and a bag of soil. His mandrake gave a mighty struggle and attempted to latch on to his hand with its screeching mouth. Harry dropped it roughly in to the pot; he wasn't very gentle as he dumped the soil all over it. Unfortunately, there was a surplus of mandrakes in need of new homes. Harry had to do another one. This one kicked him in the arm. He thumped it on the head with his wand before burying it.

Near the end of class, as Neville Longbottom was on his third mandrake, something went wrong. He dropped the hideous thing on the floor and fell down himself shortly after it hit the ground. Sprout immediately rushed to replant the mandrake. She gave Neville a cursory glance when she was finished.

"It appears he's fainted!" she announced. "This is why I warned all of you not to fuss with your earmuffs!"

Everyone laughed. Class ended before she could lecture them any further.

Next was what Harry had been least looking forward to all day: Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry took a seat in the very back of the class with Draco and Blaise. Crabbe and Goyle sat near Draco, continuing to act as bodyguards. Every girl in the class fought to get a seat in the front. Hermione Granger snagged the first one. The others were battled over in dirty manners until the bell rang and the losers were forced to take a seat in the second row.

At the moment everyone was comfortably seated, Gilderoy Lockhart, clad in outrageous violet-colored, velvety robes, entered the classroom with a profound look upon his face. Pompously, he strode down the middle aisle of the desks. Some of the boys watched him in awe; all of the girls watched him with dreamy expressions upon their faces.

Harry watched him exasperatedly as he strode up to the blackboard and turned to face them swiftly. The speed of the movement caused his velvet robes to ripple magnificently. The effect made the girls sigh. Harry found it to be both epic and unbearably cheesy at the same time.

Lockhart raised an eyebrow. "Welcome," he said with what was obviously supposed to be a grave, dramatic voice, "to your Defense Against the Dark Arts class. I am your teacher, Gilderoy Lockhart. I daresay some of you have heard of me."

Several of the girls giggled.

"Well," said Lockhart, "Professor Dumbledore asked me to fill this position because of my plentiful, rich experience in defending myself against all things dark and magical."

"I heard that the Board couldn't come up with a suitable replacement and you were the only one who applied for the job," said Draco. Harry chuckled, along with Blaise and Theodore Nott. Crabbe and Goyle laughed stupidly.

"Well, you heard wrong, my boy!" said Lockhart dramatically. "I beat out several dozen other applicants for this most coveted position. I

felt it was my duty to pass on my knowledge to future generations of witches and wizards."

Harry rolled his eyes at Lockhart's pompous, egotistical explanation.

"Before we begin, I shall take attendance to find out who my new pupils are!"

Harry sighed as Lockhart began to call out names. Many of the female students beamed when their name passed through Lockhart's lips.

And then Lockhart reached Harry's name with a look of surprise on his face.

Reluctantly, Harry raised his hand to show Lockhart that he was, indeed, in the class, although he wished he'd skipped it.

"Ah!" cried Lockhart. "Harry Potter! Come here, my boy, come here!"

"I'm fine sitting down," Harry replied, neglecting to call Lockhart 'sir' or 'Professor', a fact which went unnoticed by the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"Oh, I understand," said Lockhart, now wearing a brilliant smile. "I understand. You're very humble, Harry, although you're nearly as famous as me!"

"At least I'm famous or something that actually happened," Harry muttered under his breath. Lockhart didn't seem to notice.

"You must come to Hogsmeade with me, Harry! Think of it: a picture of us together. Why, we might even make the front page of the Daily Prophet!"

"Actually, I don't think second years are allowed to go to Hogsmeade," said Harry, aware that Lockhart was referring to the periodic trips some of the students took to the wizarding village near Hogwarts. Harry thought that they weren't allowed to go until their third year; for this he was very glad.

"Oh, pity!" said Lockhart. "Well, some other time, perhaps? Eh, Harry?"

"Sure," said Harry with just a hint of sarcasm.

"Excellent!" cried Lockhart, flashing the class another smile. The girls positively swooned.

"Now," Lockhart continued, "I thought we'd begin our first class with a little quiz. Nothing too taxing, you know. I'm sure you've all read my books. This quiz will test what you've learned."

Harry waited, tapping his fingers upon his desk as Lockhart passed the quiz out. When Harry received his copy, he looked at it and didn't know whether to laugh or to question Lockhart's mental integrity.

The quiz read something like this:

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?
2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's most secret ambition?
3. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's most cherished memory?
4. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's finest achievement to date?
5. From whom does Gilderoy Lockhart draw his inspiration?

The quiz continued on and on and on with questions very similar to those until at last it reached number 54 which read:

54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?

Harry knew the answers to none of the questions, so he did what he thought best in this situation. He worked his way through the quiz, thinking up the most absurd answers and writing those down. He was almost sorry when Lockhart called for the quizzes to be handed in. Harry felt he truly had crafted a fine work of comedic art with his answers.

When all the quizzes were in, Lockhart strode to a supply closet and withdrew what appeared to be a cage covered with an old sheet.

Lockhart sat this cage upon his desk. It rattled and jerked several times; it seemed to be emitting a kind of chattering noise.

"Now," said Lockhart. "Something much more practical!"

"Professor," said Hermione a bit breathlessly. "What exactly in that cage? It almost sounds like the vocalizations of pixies."

"Right you are, Ms. Granger!" Lockhart said. "Five points to Gryffindor. Within this cage are pixies-cornish pixies to be exact. Freshly caught Cornish pixies!"

Some students (mostly girls) gasped. Harry had no idea what a Cornish pixie was, so he didn't gasp. He simply buried his chin in his hand and wondered how Lockhart had gotten the job; the man was clearly a twit.

Seamus Finnigan, a Gryffindor boy, laughed.

Lockhart flashed him what was probably supposed to be a grave but quizzical look. "Yes, Mr. Finnegut?"

"Finnigan, actually," said Seamus.

"Right, right," Lockhart agreed, "Fonngian, that's what I said."

"It's... never mind it."

"Yes, well, what's so funny Mr. Furnican?"

"It's just that pixies... I mean, they aren't exactly dangerous are they?"

Lockhart seemed to be about to burst with excitement, and, upon hearing Seamus's words, he let out a cry of laughter that made the girls in the front row jump.

"Don't be so sure, Mr. Fallington! These pixies are devilishly tricky little blighters!"

And then, without further preamble, Lockhart pulled the sheet from the cage and released a dozen little flying creatures into the room.

Several of the girls screamed at the sight of them. Harry couldn't blame them. The pixies looked like tiny demons with wings.

"Professor!" Hermione cried. "Those aren't Cornish pixies!"

"Of course they are, Ms. Granger!" said Lockhart. "I caught them myself."

The pixies were now zooming around the room, picking up books and tossing them here and there. Several of them attempted to bite students. Those received a good smack with one of Gilderoy Lockhart's works of fiction.

"Professor, these are Doxies!" Hermione cried.

Several of the girls let out shrieks of terror and bolted for the door. Draco immediately crushed the legs of one of the Doxies he'd smacked to the floor and then jumped away from it as though it might suddenly jump up and latch onto his face with its sharp little teeth.

"That's nonsense!" said Lockhart, smacking a Doxy away from his face with a textbook.

"No, Professor, these really are Doxies!" Hermione insisted as she ducked to avoid one flying at full speed toward her head.

"Preposterous!" Lockhart declared, drawing his wand. "Observe! Peskipixie Pestronomi!"

Nothing happened. In fact, the Doxies, as Harry thought they must be, seemed to get even crazier. They all banded together and flew straight for Lockhart who gave an almost girlish cry of fright, bolted into his office, and slammed the door behind him. Harry laughed as the swarm of Doxies landed on the door knob and began to tug at it vigorously. Their little claws emitted sharp sounds as they scratched the metal of the doorknob.

"Oh, dear!" Hermione cried in horror. "We have to stop them!"

"Why?" asked Harry and Blaise in unison. Everyone else was now either gone, or in the process of exiting the classroom, except for Ron Weasley and Draco. Both of them were beating separate

Doxies into unconsciousness. Draco was using what appeared to be a shoe and Ron was using the thinnest volume Gilderoy Lockhart had written (which was actually very thick at five-hundred and twenty-one pages).

"Their fangs are poisonous!" Hermione yelled at Harry.

"Good!" Harry replied.

Hermione looked at him as though he'd just spit fire.

"What?" she cried.

"It'll teach him not to go messing around with things he doesn't understand," Harry said.

"Harry, it's a wonder those things didn't bite him when he caught them! We have to help him."

The bell rang.

"Good luck with that, Granger," said Harry.

He gathered his things and promptly left the classroom. Draco followed him. Harry could hear Hermione groan in frustration behind them.

As Harry turned down the corridor in the direction of his next class, he heard Hermione shout an incantation.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

She shouted it several more times until Harry could no longer hear her. He shook his head. Lockhart was a fraud. Harry had known that the man made up everything he put in those books of his. It was just glaringly obvious. Now, Harry found that he was a rotten Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. As Harry made his way to Potions, the last class of the day, he considered things.

Snape instructed them to create a Forgetfulness Potion as a warm-up lesson. That had been their final exam last year. Harry's mind was on Lockhart's teaching ability as he made his potion. Hermione

burst into the classroom with Ron Weasley in tow sometime later. Her bushy hair was a mess and she looked quite harassed.

Snape took twenty points from Gryffindor as penance for the combined tardiness of Hermione and Ron. Hermione flashed Harry a dangerous look as she began to brew her Forgetfulness Potion. Harry shrugged at her and thought about Lockhart.

All last year, they'd been taught by Quirrel and learned almost nothing. This was in spite of the fact that Quirrel had been a follower of Voldemort and should probably have known a thing or two about defense against Dark Magic.

Harry realized that they were going to learn even less with Lockhart; this was not good. Harry had a precious few offensive and defensive spells in his arsenal. He knew this wasn't ideal, especially if Dumbledore was planning to put him in harms way. After all, he did plan to put Harry back with the Dursleys.

Harry needed to learn some solid defensive and offensive spells in order to be ready to combat anything that came his way. Lockhart also vexed him greatly. The man needed to either get the sack, or Harry was going to have to start studying Defense Against the Dark Arts a lot more. The latter would be difficult as Harry was reminded when Snape gave them a large helping of Potions homework.

Your author has a nice, very simple idea on how to get Lockhart out of the picture.... This will simply be the first step in to a bit more AUish territory, and will serve to both distance the fic even more from canon, as well as allow me to get students taught some good spells to use for future combat and such. Plus, I want to either take a character from the Ministry and mold them into my own character, or else make an OC. As many people might tell you, some of my OCs can be quite... charismatic (i.e. the OC named Xarkun). That is all.

Chapter 22: The Return of the Heir

"What is the Chamber of Secrets, sir?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore, as though he'd forgotten Harry was standing there. "It's nothing you need to worry about right now. I suggest you return to your dorm and get a good night's rest. You have class tomorrow, you know."

"But what's happened to this ghost, sir?" Harry demanded. "What's going on?"

"It is my belief that this ghost has been petrified, in a manner of speaking," said Dumbledore, although it sounded as though he was trying to cover something much deeper up.

"Oh, dear!" said Professor McGonagall, as though she'd just realized the deeper meaning. "Albus, what on earth.... Potter!"

"Professor?"

"To your dormitory at once!"

"But, Professor-"

"The Headmaster has already answered your question. This is nothing you need to worry about. Off you go, or you shall receive detention!" McGonagall's urgency contradicted her statement about it this being 'nothing Harry needed to worry about'. Unfortunately, Harry had no choice. Filch seized him by the robes, and tossed him out the door and on to a landing of the Grand Staircase. The door to the third floor slammed shut behind him. Harry put his ear up to it in an attempt to hear what Dumbledore might be telling McGonagall, but there was no sound. Harry suspected they might have enchanted it. He had no idea how to break such magic. He realized he had no choice but to return to his dormitory; he had homework to finish anyway. Snape and McGonagall would probably both skin him alive if he didn't complete his assignments. He rushed down the Grand Staircase, and as he turned in to the corridor that led to the Entrance Hall, he nearly ran in to Snape.

"Potter!" Snape hissed. "What is the meaning of this? Are you aware of the time? It is after eleven-thirty."

"Detention with Lockhart," Harry said very quickly as an explanation.

"Ah, yes," said Snape. "Regrettably, you had to submit to such an idiotic punishment. I hope you've learned something from it."

"Yeah. Do the homework Lockhart gives me since I could probably get it done in two minutes anyway."

"Correct. This way, he won't be able to come up with a suitable excuse for anyone to assist him in replying to his fan mail." Snape practically spat the last two words. "Now, off to your dorm, Potter. You have an essay for Potions to finish, and believe me, my detentions are actually punishments. The detention I gave you and Granger last year was nothing."

"Right. Sir, I think they'll need you on the third floor."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"I think it's best if you just go see yourself, sir. There's writing on the wall, and a ghost has been petrified."

"What do you mean 'a ghost has been petrified', Potter?"

"I don't know, sir. Dumbledore wouldn't tell me."

"Professor Dumbledore, Potter. He is your Headmaster, and you must show him adequate respect."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Snape. "Professor Dumbledore will probably need you."

"Very well. I'll go and assess the situation. Potter, get to the common room immediately. Obviously, anything that has the capabilities to 'petrify a ghost' is dangerous."

"Right," said Harry. He rushed off to comply with Snape's orders mostly because he did not wish to find out how bad a detention from Snape might be. Though Harry liked and respected his Potions teacher, and he thought Snape liked him well enough, he was very sure Snape would give him detention if the need arose. Harry also thought that a detention from Snape would be even worse than a

detention from McGonagall. Though Snape favored Slytherins because they were in his house, Harry had witnessed first-hand that Snape would punish them severely if they stepped a toe across a certain boundary line. That line usually began at embarrassment to the Slytherin house, or unwarranted slacking in Potions because Snape was already favorable to his students in that class. He wouldn't tolerate them slacking any more than he let them.

Harry also not sure what could petrify a ghost. He hardly knew what petrification was. He thought he'd heard muggles (he scowled, the word always put him in a worse mood) use the term, or one of its variations before. Although, whenever those people talked about it, they usually referred to worms and sunlight. Obviously, there was no sunlight inside Hogwarts, especially at eleven-thirty in the evening. Harry was positive ghosts wouldn't be petrified by such a trivial thing anyway. He'd seen many a ghost floating through corridors in the daytime, past windows and through the beams of sunlight filtering through them so that they almost disappeared from sight.

Harry was sure magic was behind it, but he didn't really know of anything that could petrify. He thought of the spell *Petrificus Totalus*. That was the full Body-Bind Curse. Technically, that didn't petrify people, but maybe a stronger variation of the curse did? Harry had no idea. He wondered, too, how any of this was connected to the Chamber of Secrets, whatever that might be. He supposed it was a secret chamber that contained secrets, which of course was redundant since that was its name. Harry wondered what kind of secrets such a chamber might contain. Whatever it was, it had frightened McGonagall. Anything that frightened her was probably very bad.

Lastly, Harry thought about 'the Heir' mentioned in the writing on the wall. He wondered what sort of heir it was, and who his enemies were. Ghosts, perhaps? But McGonagall would have no reason to fear this heir because he or she was only attacking ghosts. Petrified ghosts wouldn't really be such a terrible calamity. Although it might be highly inconvenient for anyone that had to walk through one. There was something much more sinister behind this, Harry knew. It was obvious. McGonagall and Dumbledore hadn't done a very good job of keeping their concerns concealed; McGonagall especially.

Before Harry knew it, he was in the common room. It was probably nearly midnight now. He rushed down to his dorm to grab his

Transfiguration and Potions work, careful not to wake Draco, Blaise, Nott, Crabbe, or Goyle, and then rushed back up in to the common room. He spent at least two hours completing the assignments. It might've been more. All the while he cursed Lockhart for being such a pompous, selfish, egotistical moron. He also cursed him with words he'd never really used to describe anyone except Petunia. He found it somehow fitting to call Lockhart those things.

By the time he completed his assignments, he was dead tired, and all thoughts of the Chamber of Secrets, the Heir, and petrified ghosts were gone from his mind. He crept back down in to the dorm, set his work aside, slipped off his robes, and crawled in to bed.

Five minutes later, it seemed, he awoke and everyone was gone. Exhausted and groggy from such a late night, Harry struggled to get dressed and then made his way up to the Great Hall, a bit dazed.

When he entered the Hall, he was greeted with a loud buzz of chatter. Louder than normal, Harry thought. It was never this lively in the morning.

Harry made his way to his usual seat and, upon sitting down, buried his head in his hands, yawned deeply, and closed his eyes for a moment.

Daphne Greengrass' voice shook him out of his sleepy stupor a second later.

"I'm telling you!" she cried rather shrilly in the direction of Pansy Parkinson. "This is Professor Binn's doing! Dumbledore wants to replace him with another ghost, so he's going around and petrifying them!"

"That's ridiculous," Pansy returned. "Ghosts don't petrify one another! Do they...?"

"Of course not," Draco snapped in their direction. Harry sat watching the exchange without comprehension before something dawned on him. They all knew about the Fat Friar? Word spread very quickly in Hogwarts. "Didn't you hear about the writing on the wall?" Draco continued. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. It said 'enemies of the Heir beware'."

"Really, Malfoy?" Daphne retorted. "And who gave you this idea?"

"A prefect," Draco replied.

"They work for Dumbledore, you twat! See! There's a conspiracy going on to oust Binns; not that I'm against it-"

"Blows things way out of proportions, that one," Blaise muttered.

Daphne didn't seem to hear him. She was still discussing conspiracy theories with Pansy Parkinson and a few other Slytherin girls. They all seemed to disagree with her.

"She's wrong, too," said Draco.

"Who's the 'Heir'?" Harry asked, yawning. "What's the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Are you daft, Potter? Oh, I forgot; you are. You wouldn't know much about it, would you? The Heir is the Heir of Slytherin. There's an old legend that Salazar Slytherin built a Chamber of Secrets or something in the castle, and I guess when it's opened, mudbloods start to die."

"How do you know this?" Harry asked.

"My father. The Chamber was opened when he was in Hogwarts. He doesn't tell the story much, but he mentioned it over the summer."

"But if the Chamber kills mudbloods, then why was a ghost petrified?"

"I don't know," said Draco, shrugging his shoulders. He didn't seem to think this ordeal with the ghost was very significant.

Neither did Harry. Most of the rest of the student body seemed to disagree. The remainder of the day was filled with rumors about the Chamber of Secrets, and by dinner, almost every student had seen the writing on the wall of the third floor. Apparently, no one could erase it.

Everyone in the Great Hall seemed to be discussing it nervously, including the staff. Harry caught bits and pieces of conversations

here and there. People were frightened because a ghost had been petrified. Nobody had any idea how that could be done. The teachers kept their conversations less audible to stray ears, they were whispering to one another. All had very grave looks upon their faces, even Snape. Lockhart was the sole exception. He ate his dinner as though nothing significant (or possibly dangerous) had happened. Whenever he heard McGonagall say something to Dumbledore he waved his hand dismissively. McGonagall looked as though she wanted to strangle him. Hagrid, the gamekeeper stood nearby. He too looked annoyed with Lockhart. Harry thought that he himself was probably angrier at Lockhart than anyone, even the people who received replies to their fan mail about how idiotic they were. Because of Lockhart, Harry had a pounding headache from lack of sleep, and McGonagall had given him a D (for Dreadful) on his assignment.

Blaise and Draco were discussing the Chamber of Secrets again. Draco insisted once more that he didn't really know much about it; all he knew was that the enemies of the Heir of Slytherin were mudbloods, so they didn't really have anything to worry about. As for the Fat Friar, Draco said it was probably a fluke thing. The next person to be petrified would be a mudblood. Apparently they were supposed to die, though.

A month passed without incident. No one died or was petrified. September bled in to October at a brisk pace, and soon normalcy seemed to return to the castle. People were still uneasy about the Chamber of Secrets, though. Harry had forgotten all about it. He was concentrating on his school work which had doubled. He was very smug these days, though. Lockhart was always in a bit of a bad mood now. Harry thought he must've gotten replies from a few disgruntled fans. Sure enough, when Harry got a glimpse in to Lockhart's office, he saw a large stack of fan mail. Harry thought there must be several nasty letters amongst them, but it looked as if they'd been accumulating since September, and Lockhart had been neglecting them. Now that he was reading them, he seemed to dislike what he found.

Harry didn't mind Lockhart's classes so much after he realized that. He was now studying Defense Against the Dark Arts on his own time, out of a book. It wasn't as good as having a competent teacher, Harry thought, but he was tired of not learning any good spells.

One day, after class, Lockhart stopped Harry before he had a chance to leave.

"Harry, Harry," said Lockhart with a false smile. "You didn't, by any chance, write something misleading to a few of my fans, did you? Er... you see... one woman is under the impression that I admitted I was the father of her child. She lives in New Zealand. I've never been to New Zealand, Harry. So... you didn't, by chance...."

"No, sir!" said Harry as though he was shocked by this. "That's a bit crazy. But... you know, sir. Those fans can be mental."

Lockhart smiled as though he'd just been reassured. "Right you are, Harry. Right you are. Those fans can be mental. Very good, very good. I'm sure this is normal. Now, off you go my boy! Don't want to be late for your next class, eh!"

Harry went off smiling. He couldn't wait to see what other disgruntled fans had sent Lockhart. It seemed apparent that Lockhart had been putting off responding to the angry replies he'd received. Harry wondered if they might send more. Perhaps it would be during breakfast time where everyone could see.

Harry was surprised to find there was only a week left till Halloween when he glanced at a calendar. The difficulty of classes always seemed to intensify before a holiday, no matter what it was. Harry had to drop his reading of real Defense Against the Dark Arts books in order to be more prepared for Charms which was unusually tricky. Harry had always found Charms to be... not easy, exactly. Charms just wasn't as glaringly difficult as Transfiguration, and Flitwick wasn't as overtly critical and demanding as Snape, so Harry rarely ever read ahead in his book for that class.

Finally, the week came to a close. Halloween fell on a Saturday. Harry was determined not to miss the feast for any reason like he had last year. If a troll was in the castle this time, it wasn't going to be his business.

Harry reached the Great Hall to find jack-o-lanterns replacing the floating candles, and swarms of live bats. He'd seen this last year, but it still impressed him.

Harry took his usual seat, and shortly after that, the feast began. It was as large and delicious a feast as Hogwarts ever had with cornucopias full of all manner of food. When it was done, Harry stood up to leave, and Lockhart rushed to him immediately.

"Er... Harry," he said with a rather embarrassed look upon his face. "Are sure you didn't say anything misleading to the fans? I... well... you see, I received a particularly nasty Howler yesterday...."

"No," Harry said. "I'm sure I didn't. Maybe they're just annoyed you haven't read your fan mail quickly enough?"

"Hmm," hummed Lockhart, thinking to himself for a moment. "Oh, maybe you're right. I'm sure it was just another fluke thing." This time Lockhart didn't sound as reassured.

"Exactly."

"Happy Halloween, Harry!"

And then Lockhart rushed off to rejoin the staff. None of them look thrilled about it.

Harry rolled his eyes and then rushed off to the doors just as the collective student body began to stir and rise from their seats. Harry made it out to the Entrance Hall and stopped short of crossing it in the center. There was more red writing, and it was on the floor, right at his feet.

Off on the other side of the Entrance Hall, Filch and Mrs. Norris stood frozen before a suit of armor it appeared Filch was polishing. The students were beginning to pour out now. Many of them spied the writing and hurried up to get a better look at it. In a matter of moments, it was completely circled, and there was much pushing and shoving in the throng. Some others went to investigate Filch and Mrs. Norris. Harry heard them gasp loudly.

Evidently, someone had called for the teachers because just about the entire staff exited the Great Hall at that time. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Lockhart, and Snape made their way to the writing quickly while Sprout and several others rushed over to Filch.

"Silence!" McGonagall called a bit shrilly. "Silence!"

The din quieted.

"Oh, dear," said Dumbledore. "It appears our hopes are lost, Minerva. I'm afraid this is quite serious." Dumbledore inclined his head to look over the students. "Pomona?" he called.

"He's been petrified, Albus!" Sprout returned. "So's the cat!"

There were several gasps, a bout of nervous whispering, and a proclamation of joy or two. McGonagall glared at George Weasley (who was just about to make a smart remark) so furiously that he closed his mouth.

"Well," said Lockhart loudly. "I think it's obvious this is a threat! One that we should not take lightly."

Harry almost rolled his eyes again. Lockhart was now the king of redundancy. The red writing on the floor read:

The Heir has now returned to Hogwarts. Petrification is a prelude....

If that wasn't a threat, Harry wasn't sure what was. Although, it wasn't a glaringly obvious threat. Perhaps Lockhart felt the need to proclaim the existence of the threat because it had taken him a moment to realize there was one. Maybe he thought other students hadn't noticed. The problem was, nobody was as stupid as Lockhart.

"Headmaster," Harry heard Snape say quietly.

Harry struggled to listen to what Snape was telling Dumbledore, but he couldn't catch anything.

"Quite right, Severus," said Dumbledore. "Minerva?"

"Attention!" McGonagall called. "All of you are to return to your dormitories at once. Keep in groups and don't dawdle! Please try to avoid the writing on the floor and Mr. Filch! Off with you!"

There was a bit of a mad rush to comply. Harry made his way through the crowd toward the dungeons. His haphazard trek in between students took him close to Filch. Harry paused to get a look at him. He was holding a rag out in front of him as if to continue

polishing the chest plate of the suit of armor before him. His eyes were squinted, as though he'd been trying to discern some impurity in the armor at the time of his petrification. Mrs. Norris stood with her back arched and her mouth open as though she'd been hissing. Harry shook his head and continued off to the Slytherin common room.

Rumors spread rampantly through the castle over the next few days. There was speculation about who could be behind the petrifications. The common suspects were Slytherins. Even Slytherins suspected someone from their own house. Harry still didn't find these incidents very troubling. He really didn't understand what all the fuss was about. The mandrakes they were growing in Herbology were going to be used in an antidote created by Snape to revive Filch and Mrs. Norris. The ghost was another problem entirely. Nobody was quite sure how to handle that. Anyway, it wasn't as if they were dead. It really wasn't a major issue, Harry thought. Certainly not as major as the rumor about the first Quidditch match of the season being cancelled due to the petrifications.

Draco was very concerned about this rumor. He was even angrier about it than Harry. He didn't want anything to come in the way of his first Quidditch match. His mother and father were supposed to attend, and he wanted to impress them. Draco expressed his desire for the 'Heir' get to petrifying mudbloods almost every mealtime as well. He brought up what he insisted was an extremely important point. If the Heir was going to ruin Quidditch, he might as well do so by ruining mudbloods.

Harry agreed. Nobody really cared that the Fat Friar was gone (though Harry, personally, wasn't sad to see Filch petrified), so the petrifications of mudbloods needed to start happening soon, Harry thought. There were several of them, as well as a blood traitor or two, that Harry thought Hogwarts could do without for a time.

There was also Lockhart.

One morning, all Harry's anger about Quidditch possibly being cancelled abated. A large, dirty looking owl flew in to the Great Hall, and dropped a brilliant red envelope before Lockhart whose large, pompous smile immediately sank into a frown. The owl, which looked slightly malnourished, then grabbed some article of food from Lockhart's plate and promptly flew off. Lockhart looked nervously at

the envelope. Hagrid let out a hearty, booming laugh that caught the attention of everyone in the Great Hall.

All heads turned to see what Hagrid was laughing about and they found Lockhart clutching the red envelope tightly as if he thought it might explode and he wanted to keep flak from flying everywhere. Several people sniggered upon laying eyes on the envelope.

Draco snorted. "That's a Howler. About time someone gave them a piece of their mind."

"What is a Howler, anyway?" Harry asked.

"You'll see," said Draco.

"Well," said Professor McGonagall who was sitting next to Lockart. "Open it, Gilderoy."

Lockhart let out a rather girlish, and very phony laugh. "Well, you see, Minerva, I'm afraid it might contain some...."

"You know, Gilderoy," said Snape from across the table. "That if you don't open it, it will explode, and is likely that a good portion of the castle will hear it when it does."

"Quite right, Severus," said Lockhart nervously. It looked like he was sweating. "Quite right.... Well.... I suppose I'll just have to get rid of it, then....."

Snape smiled. "An excellent idea."

Lockhart stood up, placed the letter on the table, and aimed his wand at it.

"Luckily," said Lockhart, "I know just the spell for-"

At that moment, the sound of ripping paper filled the Hall, it was magnified to a very loud volume. Harry assumed that it was the Howler because Lockhart grew immediately pale.

Then, a loud voice seemed to emanate from the Howler. It was that of a woman. She had a very heavy Southern American twang that

sounded like the stereotypical accent of Americans that lived in the South.

"Dear Gildeory Lockhart," she began. "This is Ms. Loretta Beauregard of Crawfordville, Florida in the United States of America. I received your reply to my question, and I'll tell you, I was mighty angry, sir! MIGHT ANGRY! You're the father of my lovechild, Gilderoy, and you as good as admitted it! My dear husband Jim Bob left me when he saw that our little Billy Bob had too much white in him! I ain't gonna deal with this on my own, Gilderoy! You start sending me them child payments, or I swear to the good Lord that I will fly on my fat bottom across the Atlantic on a broom, come to England, and beat the living daylights out of you with my first till you give me my CHILD SUPPORT! Little Billy Bob don't have no daddy no more, and it's all your fault, Gilderoy!"

"And trust what I'm sayin', you good-for-nuthin, pompous playboy—I am way worse than some Wagga Wagga Werewolf, and baby, if I don't see some cash real soon, you're gonna get a whole lotta Loretta! You think them Vampires was bad. I'll show you bad! Don't make me come over there and kick yo' skinny, white-boy ass!"

The Howler then exploded, blackening Lockhart's pale face. The Great Hall remained silent. It was quieter than Harry had ever seen before. McGonagall looked as though she was attempting to hold back laughter as she sat next to Lockhart. Dumbledore wore a slightly amused expression. Sinistra of Astronomy looked like a young girl that had just stumbled upon a particularly juicy scandal. Sprout looked shocked. Flitwick was staring blankly toward Lockhart. Hagrid was half smiling, half grimacing. Snape looked very smug.

Lockhart picked up the Howler, and then practically ran out of the Great Hall. As soon as the doors shut behind him, everyone inside burst in to laughter.

Harry laughed until he cried, well aware that this was all his doing. Snape gave him an approving look from the staff table.

Lockhart became reclusive in the days following the incident, and he rarely left his office for anything but class. On the rare times he was spotted trekking down seldom-used corridors, nobody so much as made eye contact with him.

Despite the very welcome bit of comic relief that the Howler incident in the Great Hall provided, most of the students in Hogwarts were still shaken from the petrification of Filch and Mrs. Norris. Harry noticed more and more people forming larger groups as they trekked from class to class, all wary about becoming the next victim. The Slytherins remained confident that the Heir would only be after mudbloods. They were convinced that the Fat Friar was, indeed, a fluke, and that Filch got petrified because he crossed one too many pure-bloods.

Herbology became a very hectic class. The sole purpose of the class now seemed to be mandrake growing. Sprout was demanding that each of the second years take care of at least three mandrakes each. Harry found the task rather exhausting. Mandrakes needed very specific amounts of food and water, according to Sprout. Apparently she wanted to have them grown in optimum conditions. Harry thought she was being foolish, and quite obsessive. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, seemed to relish the challenge of growing multiple mandrakes. While everyone else only had three (Hermione, though, had four), Neville was taking care of seven. Harry was surprised at this. Neville had fainted because of mandrakes the first day. Now he was growing them like a professional Herbologist.

The first Quidditch match of the season, between Slytherin and Gryffindor, was rapidly approaching. Apparently it was not going to be cancelled because of the petrifications. Both Harry and Draco breathed a sigh of relief when they heard that. When the day of the game arrived, however, Draco looked as pale as Lockhart who, of course, was nowhere to be seen at the staff table.

Lockhart was probably still cooped up in his office, lying in a fetal position and trying to get over the Howler. Harry wondered if he'd received anymore. Harry was also surprised that nothing in the Daily Prophet had appeared regarding the incident. Harry thought about providing them an anonymous tip, or posing as one of the people Lockhart had 'wronged' with his response to fan mail, but Hedwig wasn't in a very friendly mood these days. She was still a bit sore about the accident a week ago when Harry had brought her a can full of cat food rather than owl snacks. It'd been an honest mistake on Harry's part. He'd ordered it from a store in Diagon Alley and they'd somehow sent him the wrong package. Hedwig had taken one bite before exploding in anger. Harry though she felt undignified

eating a bite of cat food. He admonished her by telling her she was being an idiot, but she didn't take kindly to that, and she wouldn't even look at Harry if he tried to visit her in the Owlery now.

Harry shook his head and attempted to shake Draco out of her nervous state by insulting the Gryffindors. Draco insisted he was fine and told Harry to shut it, but Harry knew Draco wasn't fine. If Draco had been fine, he would've come up with a better insult for the Gryffindors.

Harry and Draco both left the castle for the Pitch immediately after breakfast.

They were late to the pre-game meeting Flint had decided was necessary. Flint threatened to beat them each with a Bludger bat if they were ever late to such an important meeting again. Draco, who might have snapped back angrily under normal circumstance, said nothing.

For about the next half hour, Flint drilled them all on strategy. Draco acted like he was paying rapt attention, but Harry suspected that all of Flint's words were going in one ear and out the other, and, despite the façade, Draco was actually nervous about the game. Harry hadn't really expected that Draco would be.... But, it was, after all, his first game. Understandable, Harry thought.

Game time arrived very quickly. Harry saw Draco take a deep breath.

The Slytherin team then stepped out on to the Pitch to face the Gryffindors.

Sorry for the delay in updating. Many things going on, you know. I hope you enjoyed the Lockhart-Howler incident. I thought I might have her cuss him out, but I decided it might be inappropriate for an HP fic. A black, southern woman named Loretta was pushing it anyway, I thought. And yes, the stereotypical way of speaking was intentional. If you noticed, she began to speak in a bit of a formal way in the beginning, and her language deteriorated more and more as she got pissed off. Just something I thought was funny.

Chapter 23: Heirs and Elves

The Slytherin and Gryffindor teams converged at the center of the Pitch. Harry could barely hear Madam Hooch instruct the two teams to play fairly. Her voice was nearly lost in the overpowering roar coming from the stands. Harry took a quick look at all the students. It seemed like, no matter what, every other house always took sides against Slytherin.

Madam Hooch sat the box down between the two teams. Flint and Wood gripped hands, each trying to break the bones of the other as was customary for these matches. Madam Hooch kicked open the box and released the Snitch without comment. It brushed past Harry's face before flying out of sight. Next, the Bludgers took to the air, shooting straight up. They flew so high, Harry could no longer see them. Everyone kicked off as Madam Hooch heaved the Quaffle in to the air, and then the game began.

Harry, like a seasoned veteran of Quidditch, began to circle the Pitch. He kept an eye on the Gryffindor Seeker, of course. That was just common strategy. And then Harry spotted two Bludgers on either side of him, both on a collision course for his head. He ducked just in time. The Bludgers connected above him with a deafening bang that made his ears ring. They zoomed off again in opposite directions. Harry redirected his attention to locating the Snitch. He glanced at the Gryffindor Seeker who was still circling the Pitch. The Snitch remained unfound for now.

Harry barely missed a shout of warning directed at him. Not two seconds later, the Bludgers returned for a second attack. Both of them. It barely took a moment for Harry to register the fact that something was wrong. The odds were that a two Bludgers would attack the same player two times in a row were astronomical. Harry was positive they hadn't been directed at him by enemy beaters because Lee Jordan had taken notice and voiced Harry's very thoughts to the crowd.

Harry dodged the Bludgers' second attempt to knock him from his broom and angled down in a steep dive. He looked behind himself to see both the Bludgers and the Gryffindor Seeker on his tail. The Bludgers were too close for comfort, the enemy Seeker was far away. Harry's eyes locked with the Seeker's for a brief moment and a look of confusion abruptly crossed the Seeker's face. Harry

attributed it to the behavior of the Bludgers'. The Gryffindor Seeker had also evidently thought that Harry had found the Snitch. This was not the case. Harry was being attacked.

Before he hit the ground, Harry pulled up, and shot forward toward the stands at full speed. The Bludgers followed. The Gryffindor Seeker did not. By now, Lee Jordan had forgotten about the game and was only commentating on Harry's situation. Harry ignored it, along with the cries of the people in the stands.

There was a loud collective gasp as Harry pulled up just before crashing into the bottom of the stands. He'd expected the Bludgers to shoot forward and crash in to the lower walls he'd just avoided, but that only half happened. One Bludger mirrored Harry's maneuver and kept on Harry's tail. The other did hit the lower wall of the stands, and somehow gained more momentum from it. It shot forward at an incredibly high speed and hit the tail-end of Harry's broom, snapping it in two just above the bundle of bristles. That end of the broom fell away, and Harry immediately felt the effects of the damage to his broom. His speed decreased rapidly, and he completely lost all control of the direction he was heading into. The nose of the broom began to droop. His speed finally slackened to the point where gravity took over after magic died. He reached the peak of his now-parabolic flight pattern, and then he began to fall.

His stomach leapt up into his throat.

At that moment, Harry wondered at his luck. The Snitch was right below him. He had but to reach out and grab it. Before he could do so, however, his luck was murdered by the sight of two oncoming Bludgers.

What happened next seemed to happen in very slowly. Harry reached out and seized the Snitch. It was just a little too far away. He stretched his arm as far as it would go, and he snagged one of the Snitch's wings by his fingertips. He had control of it for a quarter of a second, perhaps. Then the bit of wing he'd latched on to broke, and Harry was overtaken by the bitter disappointment of defeat. Then he met the ground. Harry cried out when he impacted, and all the wind was forced from his lungs.

It was ended now. Harry was on his back, lying in the grass on the Pitch. He took a moment to assess his situation. He didn't feel

seriously hurt. He did experience a quick jolt of fear when he realized he couldn't see very well. He wondered if he'd injured himself. If his vision was going bad, then it was probably serious. He wouldn't be able to play out the rest of the season. Although, he had just lost the game to Gryffindor, and his broom was broken. He wondered if he'd even be allowed to play at all. Then he realized his glasses had fallen off. He was about to reach out for them but something stopped him.

Lee Jordan, who had been wildly analyzing the situation and wondering if Harry had caught the Snitch finally realized that he hadn't. The crowd erupted in a crescendo of cheers, overpowering the admirably loud, but nasty bellow of disdain from the Slytherin spectators.

Then, Harry, who was still lying on his back, noticed two black splotches in the sky. It took him a long moment to realize what they were. He'd spent too much time squinting at them to roll out of the way fast enough.

One Bludger hit him so hard in his right leg that it broke with a sickening crack. The other missed his arm by inches. Harry cried out in agony as the noise in the stands abruptly turned from cries of victory and consternation to a mixture of cheers for the Bludgers and exclamations of panic. The Bludgers flew back into the air again. They paused for a moment above Harry whose eyes were watering from the agony. The hit must have completely shattered his bone. He could barely see the Bludgers at all now, but he knew they were coming for him again. He felt the adrenaline rush. The pain in his leg diminished slightly. He was afraid to try rolling out of the way again, though. He didn't want to feel what would happen if he tried to move.

The Bludgers began their quick descent, aiming for him again. This time, he feared they might hit and kill him. If they were strong enough to snap his leg like it was little more than a dead pine needle, he thought they must be strong enough to bash his skull in.

Before the Bludgers got another chance two fiery explosions lit up the sky above him, and little hot Bludger bits rained down. Harry grabbed his glasses off the ground next to him before a foot crushed them and tried to force himself to sit up a little. Immediately, he regretted the ill-considered action. He was barely able to lift himself up an inch before that motion sent a shot of pain through his legs

that nearly made him scream. He had to fight back tears from the jarring pain.

He shoved his glasses on to see the crowd of teachers, Quidditch Players, and even some students gathered around him. In the cacophony of voices, Gilderoy Lockhart's stood out the most.

"Away, away!" he cried. He fought his way through the throng and knelt down at Harry's side. His mere presence shut half the people up. Everyone knew about the Howler. Harry was surprised Lockhart had the guts to show his face at a very public event like the Quidditch match where the entire school gathered. Although, Lockhart was, for once, dressed in inconspicuous clothing. He wore only simple, thick, brown robes to protect against the chilly autumn weather.

Lockhart knelt down at Harry's side and glanced over his leg.

"Ah! Harry, my boy," he said, "it seems to be broken." He placed a hand on it as if to check.

The pain made Harry want to kill Lockhart. Not just kill him, but destroy him. Rip him limb from limb and make him scream so loud that he blew out his vocal cords and bled from his throat. The pain from the simple touch was so intense, it made Harry feel light-headed. Was it not blindingly obvious that his leg was broken? Harry couldn't bring himself to ask. He couldn't even open his mouth to scream because his teeth were clenched together so tightly. Had his tongue been between his teeth, he would have bit through it.

"Not to worry!" Lockhart cried. "I'll have this fixed immediately!"

"Gilderoy!" snapped Professor McGonagall from somewhere in the crowd. "Don't you dare attempt anything foolish. Potter must be taken to the Hospital Wing immediately!" There was a slight pause filled with several grunts. "I will not ask you students again to get out of my way!"

"Nonsense, Minerva!" Lockhart called back. "Let's not trouble Poppy with something this easily fixed. She's got enough to deal with."

Harry realized that he'd have to speak. With colossal effort, he unclenched his jaw and opened his mouth.

"No, sir," said Harry. "I think we should definitely trouble her with this."

Lockhart laughed heartily and then shut up when he noticed everyone was staring at him. Their gazes were scrutinizing.

"The boy is delirious from the pain, of course," said Lockhart. His voice was no longer pompous and over-confident. He could see the skepticism in the eyes of all the people gathered around Harry. He could also probably see the Howler.

"I'm not delirious!" Harry snapped, resisting the urge to scream at from the agony of his broken leg.

It was too late. Lockhart flourished his wand in a manner too complex and ridiculous to produce any kind of useful spell and then aimed it right at Harry's broken leg.

Surprisingly, all the pain vanished.

Unsurprisingly, the people around him gasped. Harry saw why when he looked at his leg. It was... gone. A strange feeling overcame him then. His stomach roiled. Anger, the likes of which he'd hardly ever experienced, threatened to make the building pressure in his head exceed the threshold his skull would allow. His heartbeat quickened, and he felt in his chest an almost-painful burn from undiluted anxiety. It faded to black after that.

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When Harry woke up, he couldn't keep the contents of his stomach where they were. He spilled them all over the floor. Madam Pomfrey, who just happened to be heading for her office, drew her wand and aimed it at the puddle of sick. She gave it a causal flick and the puddle vanished.

Madam Pomfrey approached his bedside wordlessly. Harry, completely aware and conscious after his bout of vomiting remembered very clearly what had happened. A Bludger had broken his leg. Lockhart had attempted to mend it, but instead he had caused it to vanish. Harry feared to look down at his legs below the bedcovers. He worried that he might vomit again if he did so. The

thought of his missing leg made him feel light-headed. He took a second and steeled himself. Then he did look at his legs. They appeared to be both there. A heady feeling of relief washed over him. It was quickly replaced by chagrin which turned very rapidly to rage.

The sound of glass knocking on wood made Harry jump. He turned his attention to Madam Pomfrey who had just magicked two cups onto the table beside his bed. One was filled with water, the other with milk.

"When you are ready, you will need to drink these, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey instructed.

"Why?" Harry managed to ask, but he then realized he didn't even care. His throat was bone dry.

"You need fluids. You've just re-grown an entire leg. Magic is usually very thorough, but it is best to be cautious. I imagine you're quite thirsty. The potion will do that to you. The milk will be good for your re-grown bones. I want you to drink it all. I'm afraid I will retire now, Mr. Potter. If you need me, please call."

Harry noticed only then that it was night time.

"Is there anything else you need before I go, Mr. Potter?"

"No," said Harry. "But... how long have I been here?"

"Just two days. Nothing to worry about, of course. Some of your friends came to pay you a visit. I'm afraid they didn't leave anything."

Two days? Harry exhaled loudly. He had to calm himself. He was actually very tired; too tired to be angry. He didn't want to get worked up over someone as worthless as Lockhart. The man was a fool in the truest sense of the word. Harry could think of several other names to call him, none of which he could ever say out loud.

"Oh," said Harry simply. He wasn't sure he believed her about 'friends' visiting. He remembered losing the Quidditch match. The Snitch had narrowly escaped him. The disappointment of losing was a new feeling for Harry. Last year, the Slytherin's season had been perfect. Thanks could be accredited largely to Harry. Now things were different. He was responsible for the Slytherin's defeat,

however indirectly. The game shouldn't be counted, he thought. There had been something wrong with the Bludgers. That was clearly evident.

Madam Pomfrey kept her eyes on him for a moment, as though she thought he might say something else. She looked mildly concerned. Maybe his anger was showing on his face, despite his best attempts to banish it. "Well, goodnight, Mr. Potter."

"Goodnight," said Harry.

And with that, Madam Pomfrey strode down the length of the Hospital Wing and entered her office, shutting the door silently behind her. Harry watched her go, and his eyes lingered on the door after it closed. Near it, he could see that one of the beds was occupied, but the curtains had been pulled around it. Harry guessed that the occupant would be Filch who'd been petrified. He briefly thought about getting up to see, but his re-grown leg felt more like extra-packaging than an actual limb that would function properly.

He tried to relax. Physically, he was still quite exhausted, but his mind would not be silenced. He let his thoughts wander. He considered the disturbing oddity of the Fat Friar. The ghost had been petrified as well. He wondered where the Fat Friar was because he didn't see it in the Hospital Wing anywhere. Harry wished he knew what had caused the petrifications. He considered Dumbledore's words about a Chamber of Secrets. The man was completely maddening. Harry wished he would have elaborated more. He didn't understand how a room could cause people to be petrified.

A rather loud crack made Harry's heart skip a beat. He nearly screamed when he spotted a very oddly shaped head at the foot of his bed. This head was large, with huge, bat-like ears, an almost comically long nose, and massive eyeballs the likes of which Harry had seen only once before. It'd been on a rather cold night during the past summer.

Harry felt all the rage from that night rekindle.

"Dobby," said Harry quietly, "you should leave because I might just get up and strangle you."

Dobby gasped, but hopped up on the foot of Harry's bed. He did not sit down, but instead stood, towering above Harry. The house-elf looked down apologetically; his ears drooped a little. He was still wearing that filthy pillowcase.

"Dobby didn't mean to-"

"I don't care what you meant, Dobby!" Harry snapped, cutting the hideous creature short. "You don't know what those filthy Muggles did to me because of you!"

Dobby sniffled loudly. "Oh, but Dobby does know, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby saw! Oh, it was terrible, sir. Just terrible! Dobby knows how it feels. He is beaten almost every day."

"Then you should leave before I beat you!" Harry hissed through gritted teeth.

"Dobby never meant for Harry Potter to get hurt! Dobby was just trying to protect Harry Potter! Dobby swears! Please, Harry Potter must believe in Dobby."

"You know, Dobby, I actually don't believe you."

"But, Harry Potter, sir! You must! Hasn't Harry Potter seen the frozen people?"

"The... frozen people? You mean the petrified people?"

Dobby gulped loudly. "Yes! Bad deeds are being done at Hogwarts, Harry Potter, sir. Bad deeds. Dobby wanted to protect Harry Potter from them!"

Harry's interest was suddenly piqued. He the rage and ill-will he felt for the house-elf was overshadowed by his curiosity. Dobby knew something. He probably did not know as much as Dumbledore. Nobody knew as much as the Headmaster, but Dobby knew more than Harry did, and that was enough.

"Dobby, what do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?"

Dobby wrung his hands together and glanced from side to side uneasily.

"Dobby mustn't say! Dobby cannot!"

The tiny house-elf hopped off Harry's bed, and ran to the table beside it. He leaned against it, and drew his head back, preparing to hit it on the side of the table. Harry sat up quickly, seized Dobby by the pillowcase, and hauled him back on the bed.

"Quit doing that!" Harry snapped.

"But Dobby must punish himself, sir! It is the way of the house-elves!"

"Punish yourself later. What do know about the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Dobby cannot say, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby has come to warn Harry Potter."

"I don't need your warnings. I want to know what you know."

"No! It's too terrible to speak of! Dobby has come to Harry Potter to tell him to leave Hogwarts."

"Leave Hogwarts?" Harry hissed. "And go back to the Dursleys?"

"Yes, sir! At least Harry Potter will be safe there! Dobby thought that if he cursed the Bludgers-"

Harry felt the rage explode anew.

"You?" Harry almost shouted. "You bewitched the Bludger? I lost a leg because of you! That's it, Dobby."

Harry reached out to grab the little house-elf's throat, but Dobby hopped away and off the bed. Harry tore his covers off, and leapt after the little house-elf.

Harry's leg didn't work all that well, but he was still fast enough to catch Dobby. The pitiful little creature squeaked as Harry grabbed it by the neck and hauled it up, setting it back on his bed. Dobby was still surprisingly light. Harry knelt down before Dobby, holding him by the neck; keeping him on the bed. Harry didn't trust his leg for

balance right now, besides, he wanted to look the little elf right in his ugly, bulging eyes.

"You tell me what the Chamber of Secrets is, Dobby, or I'll-"

"Dobby cannot!" cried the house-elf, yanking at Harry's hands in a pathetic effort to free himself. "Dobby will be punished!"

"You're a slave, aren't you, Dobby? You're a wizard's slave. That's what you said!"

"Yes, sir, Harry Potter! Dobby lives to serve wizards!"

"Well, I order you to tell me what you know!"

Dobby's eyes glanced around, and he redoubled his efforts to get Harry's arm off his neck. Those efforts were futile. Dobby was the weakest little creature Harry had ever seen.

"Dobby cannot, sir!"

"You said you wanted to protect me, so tell me!" Harry hissed. He was losing patience.

Dobby bit his lower lip. Once again, his massive eyes darted around, as though he was expecting his master to leap from the shadows and murder him. Dobby took in a deep breath.

"Dobby has not been specifically ordered not to tell anyone about the Chamber of Secrets, sir."

"Great," said Harry, giving Dobby's neck a harsh shake to emphasize the threat he posed should the house-elf decide to not speak. "Tell me, Dobby. You owe me that."

Dobby moaned nervously. "Dobby finds this hard to explain to Harry Potter, sir. The Chamber of Secrets is an old, secret place. Dobby doesn't know much about it except what he's heard."

"I don't care, Dobby. Just tell me!"

"Dobby... Dobby has heard that the Chamber is a home of a terrible creature, sir."

"What kind of creature?"

"Dobby doesn't know, sir! Dobby swears! Dobby has heard that this creature kills wizards born to Muggle parents."

"Kills mudbloods?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then what do I have to worry about? I'm a half-blood!"

Dobby gulped. Harry could feel the movement of the house-elf's throat beneath his hand. "There are other things that Harry Potter doesn't understand."

"What kind of things?"

"Dobby cannot say! Dobby has said too much already!"

"Well, someone had to open the Chamber, right?"

Dobby bit his lower lip again. "Yes, Harry Potter, sir. Someone did."

"Who? Who's the Heir of Slytherin?"

"Dobby does not know the Heir of Slytherin, Dobby only...."

"Only what, Dobby? You only know what?"

"Dobby can only guess, sir."

"Do you know who opened it?"

Dobby grimaced, as though the question caused him physical pain. The house-elf shook his head rapidly. His large ears flapped like wings, smacking the sides of his face loudly. "Dobby cannot say, sir! Dobby is prohibited!"

Harry groaned in frustration. "Then tell me who the Heir of Slytherin is!"

Dobby shook his head again. "Dobby does not know! All Harry Potter must know is that someone in the school opened the Chamber of Secrets, and that the monster will try to harm Harry Potter!"

"But, if there's really a monster behind this, it's only petrified people."

Dobby squeaked in fright. "It's only the beginning, Harry Potter, sir."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He gave the house-elf a shake. "I'm sick of this, Dobby! Tell me who's behind this right now, or I swear I'll strangle you!"

To Harry's mild surprise, Dobby burst into tears. "Dobby cannot, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby wishes he could help Harry Potter! Dobby is trying!"

"Shut up, Dobby!" Harry snapped. The elf was crying too loudly. "You're going to wake up Madam Pomfrey!"

Dobby's tiny little body was quaking with sobs. He took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself.

"Now," said Harry. "I'm going to give you one more chance. Who opened the Chamber?"

"Dobby does not know exactly, sir. Dobby has only heard...."

"Heard what?"

"A student...."

"What student?" Harry demanded. He shook Dobby roughly again. "What student? What house are they in?" The house-elf looked dangerously close to crying again. Harry scowled and tightened his grip around Dobby's neck. "You can't do this, Dobby! It's your fault that the Dursleys did those things to me, and it's your fault I had to re-grow my leg! Tell me what house they're in! Is it Gryffindor?"

Dobby's eyes went wide. "Where did Harry Potter hear that?"

Harry hadn't been expecting that kind of reaction from Dobby. His eyebrows slanted downward in surprise. "Are they in Gryffindor?"

"Dobby cannot say, sir! Please, let Dobby go! Dobby must go, or he will be punished!"

"I'll make sure you're punished if you don't tell me right-"

Harry paused in mid-sentence, turning his head to the door that led back into the school. He could clearly hear voices outside the Hospital Wing. Several voices. They were approaching quickly, and they were speaking in hushed tones. He couldn't make out the words, but he thought he heard the rather monotonous voice of Snape, as well as the calm tone of Dumbledore.

Harry cursed inwardly. Then a sharp sting erupted in his arm. He looked to see Dobby had bit him. Involuntarily, Harry released his grip on the elf's neck. Dobby darted off to the other side of the Hospital Wing. Harry stood to his feet and nearly fell when his re-grown leg threatened to give way. It was like the entire thing had fallen asleep. It would hardly support him, and yet there was no pain in it. In fact, there was hardly any feeling at all yet, further selling the illusion that his leg was asleep. All that was missing was the pins and needles sensation. Harry cursed aloud at his inability to move.

"Dobby!" Harry hissed. "Get back here!"

"No, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby must leave. Please, sir—please leave, too! Hogwarts isn't safe!"

"No!" Harry returned. "Hogwarts is my home! Don't you dare do anything again, Dobby, or I swear that I-"

But Dobby simply snapped his fingers, and, with a rather loud crack, vanished. Harry grunted in aggravation. He should've wrung the stupid thing's neck! Dobby was still on the loose. He would try again to get Harry out of Hogwarts. Harry hated the idiotic creature. The stupid, filthy little animal had cost him a leg!

At least he'd gleaned some information. He knew what the Chamber of Secrets was now... well, he knew a little more about what it was. A monster was roaming the school, petrifying people. Apparently, it could kill as well, and its targets would be anyone who wasn't a pureblood wizard. Harry guessed that it must be something Salazar Slytherin had placed in the school. That would explain the Heir of

Slytherin's role in this. Harry thought their Heir must be in Hogwarts. Dobby had insinuated that a Gryffindor had opened the Chamber, though. Harry remembered the look of surprise in the elf's eyes when he had wildly guessed that a Gryffindor was behind this. There was no way that a Gryffindor was the Heir of Slytherin, though. The Heir must be manipulating whatever Gryffindor opened the Chamber. That would explain it.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by the voices outside. They must be nearly to the door now. Harry hopped back in his bed, and threw the covers over himself. He closed his eyes just as the door to the Hospital Wing opened.

Harry opened his eyes just a tiny bit as Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, and Hagrid entered. Hagrid was carrying what appeared to be a rather rigid black bundle of cloth in his arms.

"Severus, kindly go fetch Madam Pomfrey," Dumbledore instructed. The sound of the headmaster's calm, collected voice irritated Harry. He'd sounded the same way when he'd decreed that Harry had to return to his abusive relatives next summer.

Snape went swiftly to comply with Dumbledore's orders.

"Quiet," whispered Professor McGonagall. "We needn't wake Potter."

"Righ'," said Hagrid.

"Hagrid, please set Mr. Weasley down on the bed," Dumbledore ordered.

Weasley? The name made Harry open his eyes a little more. He watched as the hulking form of Hagrid bent down over a bed on the opposite side of the room. When Hagrid stood back up, he could see the rigid bundle lying on the bed. Obviously, it was the robed form of one of the petrified Weasleys. Perhaps even the body of a dead Weasley.

Right then, Snape and Madam Pomfrey rushed back into the room.

"Oh dear, Albus!" said Madam Pomfrey. "Who is it this time?"

"Ronald Weasley. He's been petrified," said McGonagall. "I found him on my patrol near the library. He was by a window.... I thought he was looking outside at something."

"This is the first student victim," said Madam Pomfrey. "Oh, Albus, when the Ministry gets word of this...."

"They will ensure it is on the front page of the Daily Prophet, yes. And they would be quite right to inform all the parents of the Wizarding World. It would seem that Hogwarts, despite our best efforts, is no longer safe."

I realize this is not the best chapter I could have returned with. It's a transitory thing. Look for more to come soon. Then things will really start to pick up.

Chapter 24: Snow Day

STUDENT FOUND PETRIFIED IN HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

By Prophet Staff Writer, Rita Skeeter

Terror is running rampant in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ronald Weasley (pictured above), age 11, was found by faculty member Minerva M. McGonagall late last night. Professor McGonagall declined to comment on the situation when contacted, but this reporter has pieced together the facts from several witnesses who choose to remain anonymous. Young Mr. Weasley was found near the library after curfew. When approached by the aforementioned McGonagall, he did not respond in any way. The faculty and nurse of the school determined he had been petrified. An antidote is currently being developed by Professors Sprout and Snape to revive Mr. Weasley, as well as another apparent victim, Mr. Argus Filch, who was found petrified some time ago as readers will remember from earlier Prophet reports.

It appears that the previously reported writings on the walls of Hogwarts were not mere pranks by mischievous students. The case of Mr. Argus Filch cannot be considered a fluke anymore. It is clear that something inside the walls of Hogwarts is attacking students and teachers alike. One might wonder about the safety of the underage witches and wizards, many of whom are defenseless against even the simplest Dark Magic, not to mention these attacks which are surprising to even Headmaster Albus Dumbledore.

When asked to comment, Mr. Dumbledore said: "We are looking in to this matter and hope to have it resolved as soon as possible. I will personally do everything in my power to protect the students of Hogwarts." Minister Cornelius Fudge held a press conference early this morning about the matter. "I intend to work closely with Hogwarts and Albus Dumbledore to see to it that this matter is taken care of as soon as possible. The Ministry will do its part to ensure all students are adequately protected from the threat of the so-called 'Heir of Slytherin' and the 'Chamber of Secrets'."

As readers know from our previous reports on this matter, the Chamber of Secrets remains largely a mystery, and it is apparently a myth, though it is not without evidence as proven by the

petrifications of Mr. Weasley and Mr. Filch. Further information on these attacks will continue to be reported on diligently by the Daily Prophet. Questions about the safety of the students and the future of Hogwarts are now without any solid answers. Some question whether or not the school can remain open. That much remains to be seen. We can only hope that the efforts by the Ministry and those of the faculty at Hogwarts will be enough to protect our children.

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Harry slung the copy of the Daily Prophet down upon the table next to the chair he was sitting on and shook his head. He glanced back at it; at the picture of Ron Weasley, surrounded by his entire traitorous family. A rat sat in Ron's shoulder. How fitting. That's what the Wealseys were. Rats. Draco had told him their father was a Muggle lover. How one could love Muggles, Harry did not understand.

Draco sat across from Harry on one of the many leather armchairs of the Slytherin common room. To Harry's left, a fire was dying in the hearth. Blaise sat in front of it. He seemed preoccupied with something. Draco fidgeted in his armchair and cast a look at Harry.

"Well?" said Draco.

"I'm surprised it took them that long to get word of it," said Harry. "It happened two nights ago."

Blaise snorted a snort that sung of exasperation. Draco fidgeted more in his armchair, and his fingers began to tap loudly on the leather-covered armrests. Harry thought he knew exactly what they were thinking, but it was hard to focus on it when his mind was elsewhere. He was currently trying to produce a list of likely candidates. Someone had opened the Chamber of Secrets, according to Dobby. That someone was a Gryffindor.

That a Gryffindor would open the Chamber of Secrets was proof in itself that someone else was manipulating the Gryffindor to do their bidding. None of it made sense to Harry. There were so many pieces at play here, but none seemed to be connected. The Chamber of Secrets, the Heir of Slytherin, the pawn of a Gryffindor. There were other facets to the mystery as well. Dobby the house-elf

who seemed to possess a larger understanding of the mystery that was the Chamber than did anyone else in Hogwarts.

Draco cleared his throat loudly.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"The common room is empty," said Blaise.

"I can see that," remarked Harry.

"So?" said Draco in a demanding manner.

"So?" asked Harry.

"So, you said you were going to tell us what happened!" Blaise said.

"Right," Harry said, nodding. He had indeed promised them that he would tell them about what had happened. They'd noticed something was on his mind after the Quidditch incident, and he'd told them he knew more about the Chamber of Secrets. Naturally, they'd demanded to hear what he'd learned. He had told them he'd tell them later. He had not wanted anyone to overhear him talking about the house-elf called Dobby, lest they become curious about such strange matters. He'd also been stalling. He really did not want to discuss Dobby. The thought of the house-elf made his blood boil and his stomach churn with anger. The embarrassment of being manipulated and even attacked by such a pathetic, disgusting little creature would also certainly have Draco and Blaise laughing. He hoped that what the house-elf had told him would be enough to distract them, though.

"All right," Harry began, "just listen to me. Don't interrupt. When I was in the Hospital Wing, a house-elf came to... er... visit me."

Draco and Blaise exchanged glances, but they did not interrupt. Harry continued.

"This same house-elf also paid me a visit during the summer." Harry paused to smother the rage that was beginning to burn in his belly. "It dropped a cake on the head of Vernon's customer."

"Your Muggle uncle?" Blaise asked.

"Yes," Harry snapped, although he no longer wished to think of the Dursleys has relatives of any kind. "That's why they tried to keep me from Hogwarts."

"Yes," said Draco. "They're dirty Muggle pigs. I intend to have my father look into it, but what's this have to do with what you know about the Chamber of Secrets, Potter?"

"I'm getting to it," said Harry. "That house-elf warned me when it came to me at the Dursley's house. It said that I should not go back to Hogwarts because terrible things were going to happen. It knew about the Chamber before all of this even started. It knew it, somehow. And then, when I was in the Hospital Wing, it came again. It cursed those Bludgers. It wanted to hurt me badly enough to get me sent away from Hogwarts."

To Harry's surprise, neither Draco nor Blaise laughed. In fact, both of them looked quite serious.

"Did the house-elf give you its name? If it's one of the castle elves, I can have my father look into it," said Draco.

"Its name was Dobby."

Draco's eyes narrowed to slits. "What did you say, Potter?"

"Its name is Dobby," Harry repeated a bit heatedly.

Blaise's sharp intake of air made Harry direct his attention away from Draco and to his other friend.

"Isn't Dobby..." Blaise trailed off.

"Yes," Draco snapped. "Dobby is my house-elf, Potter."

"Your house-elf?" Harry nearly shouted. He paused and glanced at the arches that led to the dormitories to make sure no one was eavesdropping or entering the common room. "Your house-elf broke my leg?"

"Just wait until my father hears about this!" Draco said. "He'll kill the little animal for disobeying orders like that!"

"Good," said Harry. "It's no more than that filthy little creature deserves."

"I can't believe he left the house!"

"I can't believe he knows about the Chamber of Secrets," said Blaise.

It hit Harry then, it hadn't initially, but it was now so crystal clear. "Draco, how much does your father know about the Chamber?"

"I already told both of you, I've asked, but he won't tell me. All he knows about is what happened last time."

"But he must know more," said Harry. "Dobby told me a Gryffindor opened the Chamber."

"He told you what?" Draco sneered. "That doesn't make any sense. It's part of Dobby's idiotic thinking. He was just guessing, Potter. It makes no sense for a Gryffindor to be behind it. All he knows is what my father has said about the Chamber of Secrets. He's just guessing on all the rest of it because he feels smart now that he's found ways around my father's orders. But I'll fix that soon enough."

Harry shook his head. "You don't understand. He didn't tell me a Gryffindor opened the Chamber, exactly. I guessed. The look on his face just told me I was right."

"Maybe he does know something. I don't know. He's found a loophole in my father's orders to leave the house. He's probably been snooping around Hogwarts or something. Maybe he's seen some things. We'll find out soon enough. I'm sending my father an owl tonight."

Without further word, Draco shot up from his chair and stalked off to the dormitory to retrieve his writing supplies. Harry looked at Blaise.

"In any case, the article in the Prophet talked about shutting Hogwarts down," said Blaise.

"I know," said Harry pensively. His thoughts had been on Dobby, and the ludicrous notion that he was Draco's house-elf. Blaise's words immediately changed that. Harry now considered the situation.

A solution had to be found. He detested blood traitors like the Weasleys and hated muggleborns as much as any other Slytherin. He knew that the Chamber's purpose was to purge Hogwarts of those kinds of students. But he also knew that, in the event the Chamber succeeded in its task, Hogwarts would most definitely close. Harry did not want Hogwarts to close. He'd felt a spark of hope when Draco said his father would look in to the Dursleys, but Dumbledore was adamant about Harry returning. Harry certainly did not want to.

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The next day, all classes passed by at a History-of-Magic pace. This only made History of Magic slower, much to Harry's dismay. It seemed everyone, including the teachers, were all preoccupied with the latest petrification. Rita Skeeter's article was not wrong. Terror was palpable in Hogwarts, though no student knew exactly what it was they were afraid of. People had been petrified; frozen. A well-known antidote was already being prepared to revive them. It wasn't such a terrible fate. But the ominous threats written in blood on the walls and the floor indicated that this was but a prelude. The staff seemed to think so. New rules had been imposed. Students were not allowed to walk the corridors unless escorted by a teacher or a prefect. The curfew was now set for an earlier time than was customary. It was rumored that anyone found roaming the halls after the set time would be expelled for their own safety, of course.

The Slytherins were not as uneasy about the whole situation. This gave them the leeway to actually concentrate on something besides the Chamber of Secrets. The general focus of such concentration was directed toward Harry. Despite the fact that the Bludgers had been cursed, Slytherin had lost the Quidditch game. Unfortunately, Madam Hooch declared there was no rule dictating protocol about what should be done if cursed Bludgers (and Harry was sure it was illegal to curse them) incapacitated a Seeker. Harry suspected that such a rule did exist. Quidditch had been around for a very long time, and the amount of rules that had been crafted for it was innumerable. Madam Hooch was either biased against the Slytherin, or didn't want to look up the rule. Harry thought it must be a mixture of both.

In any case, the Slytherins seemed to think it was Harry's fault. If only they knew about Dobby. They might direct their anger at him. Harry, of course, could not tell them. He did not particularly care

about being made a scapegoat by his House. He was accustomed to being the recipient of their ire. His mind was on other things anyway.

After a grueling day of classes, Harry sat down for dinner. The Great Hall was quiet. Very few people spoke to one another. The teachers at the staff table occasionally whispered to one another. The entire mood of the Hall was somber and tense.

Draco and Blaise both took a seat in front of Harry just as Harry had begun to dig into his scrumptiously seasoned prime rib.

"Dobby has been taken care of," said Draco.

Harry bit into the prime rib. It was delicious, as was all the food at Hogwarts, but he didn't really notice.

"Good," he said to Draco. He didn't ask what Lucius Malfoy had done to Dobby. He didn't care. Nothing punishment Draco's father could think up for the disobedient house-elf could compare to what Harry could conceive of. His mind was still on the Chamber of Secrets, in any case.

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November bled into December with considerable speed. Harry thought that maybe the tension and unease in Hogwarts made the rest of the month go faster. Days seemed hazy to him now. All his time was spent either in class, the Great Hall, or the Slytherin Common Room. Harry's time in the halls and corridors of Hogwarts was fleeting and sparse now. Anytime he went out, he was with his class and a professor, or with his house and their prefects.

The classes continued on as if everything was normal. McGonagall loaded them up with homework. She said she did it because their curfew was earlier and they'd be in their Common Rooms more often, therefore they'd need something to occupy her time. Every now and then, though, she glanced at Ron Weasley's empty desk. Harry wondered if she was trying to teach them as much as she possibly could before Hogwarts closed. That thought scared him more than the Chamber of Secrets scared anyone in the entire school.

One class that Harry wished would be affected by this Chamber business was Lockhart's Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Every day, Lockhart attempted to regale them mostly with stories about his own personal (fictitious) feats. The girls seemed to pay more attention to them than normal. Maybe they found it to be escapist entertainment. The boys were even more distant. Harry was merely annoyed. It was so clear that Lockhart was a fraud to Harry. Why didn't Dumbledore fire him? Another reason to hate the headmaster.

One day, at the end of class, Lockhart made an announcement that shocked Harry.

"Before you all leave, I'd like to tell you something!" Lockhart declared in his pompous, authoritative voice—the one that he used when he wanted to hear the sound of his own voice. "I've been thinking of starting a little dueling club. With all these strict new regulations and such... well, one can never be certain if they are necessary—"

"Filch and Weasley are petrified," Harry interrupted before he could stop himself. He wanted to add: "of course they are necessary, you twit", but he did not. It wouldn't be worth a detention, and he didn't even care about Filch or Weasley. Lockhart's glaring stupidity merely vexed him to the point that he simply had to say something.

"Quite right, Mr. Potter!" said Lockhart jovially, as if Harry's comment had assisted him in his announcement-making. "I, Gilderoy Lockhart, shall be hosting a dueling club. That's right! I am going to host a club for everyone to pit their skills in defensive and offensive magic against one another. It should serve to ensure you're all ready to face any trouble that might befall you!"

Lockhart beamed at them. For once, Harry thought the man might actually have a good idea. Except the fact that Lockhart was overseeing this dueling club made the idea inherently bad. Lockhart's skill in offensive and defensive magic was legendary, and yet he possessed none.

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The title of the next morning's Daily Prophet headline read:

"HOGWARTS DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS TEACHER FOUND PETRIFIED"

If Hogwarts hadn't been in a state of cold terror before, it certainly was now. Harry took a long drink of pumpkin juice as he read Rita Skeeter's latest article. Lockhart had been found in the corridors of Hogwarts last night (Harry was surprised Rita Skeeter had discovered this so quickly). Apparently, Minerva McGonagall stumbled upon his petrified body when she was searching for him in order to tell him that she was to relieve him of his night-watching shift. The fact that Lockhart was on guard at night scared Harry. It was a good thing he would not be on guard anymore.

Fittingly, Lockhart had been found smiling brilliantly while staring into a mirror in a lavatory somewhere. McGonagall apparently found him because she heard the faucets running.

Rita Skeeter's article was almost too melodramatic for Harry to take seriously. Unfortunately, she did raise points that made the hair on the back of Harry's neck stand on end.

Lockhart was their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Almost everybody in the wizarding world believed Lockhart's fiction. They were under the impression that he was some sort of powerful wizard who's skill in magic even rivaled Dumbledore's (at least, that's what Rita Skeeter led Harry to believe). How someone so skilled and so intelligent could fall victim to such a mysterious attack was beyond all comprehension. It definitely ignited panic.

Classes were cancelled that day. Everyone was told to stay in their Common Rooms.

Harry thought sullenly of the irony of such a situation. Last year, during the winter, he'd hoped for a snow day a few times. It was winter now, and there was snow on the ground. Classes were cancelled. Some students, trying to lighten the mood, joked that it was a snow day at Hogwarts. It was indeed. Harry was afraid, however, that this 'snow day' might mark the beginning of a very early and entirely unwanted summer.

Sorry for the shortness of this chapter. I will get another one up ASAP, and it will be longer.

Chapter 25: Pieces

GILDEROY LOCKHART PETRIFIED, REPLACEMENT HIRED! BUT CAN HOGWARTS REMAIN OPEN?

By Prophet Staff Writer

Rita Skeeter

Gilderoy Lockhart is, arguably, one of the most influential wizard authors of our time; certainly one of the greatest wizards in recent memory. His exploits are legendary; his skills, nearly peerless. Yet, this man was inexplicably caught off guard and petrified in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. How this terrible fate could have befallen the beloved Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor remains as mysterious as its cause. Even Albus Dumbledore, a wizard who's skill is also legendary, cannot fathom how such a thing came to occur within the walls of his school.

The day after Lockhart was found petrified in a lavatory by Minerva McGonagall, classes in Hogwarts were canceled. The following weekend, it was reported that Albus Dumbledore met with the Board of Governors in a meeting that was rumored to be a discussion about whether or not Hogwarts would remain open following these disturbing events. Neither the Ministry nor the Board of Governors has released a statement regarding the closure Britain's greatest and only wizarding school. In fact, it was announced the Saturday after the attack on Lockhart that a replacement had been hired for his position. A decorated Auror by the name of Bane Belfry will assume the Defense Against the Dark Arts position until further notice. Along with Belfry, several more Aurors are headed to Hogwarts.

A task force has been assembled at the order of Minister Fudge to investigate Hogwarts and search for the Chamber of Secrets. Somewhere between six and ten Aurors will be on the grounds of the school at all times, searching for any clues about the Chamber of Secrets. Professor Belfry is part of this team. The Minister remains intent on putting an end to these attacks as soon as possible. He hopes that Hogwarts will not close. After all, it is the only school in Britain. Without Hogwarts, how else will our children be taught to use their magic?

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The article went on for several more pages. Most of it seemed to be nothing more than Rita Skeeter fawning over Gilderoy Lockhart. She'd gotten all the important stuff out of the way in the first three paragraphs. In Harry's opinion, she ought to have been fired long ago for blatantly biased reporting. Harry tossed the paper onto the empty plate before him. The Great Hall was notably silent again. Harry turned and frowned up at the staff table. Classes were to resume today. It was the Monday following Lockhart's petrification. Lockhart's replacement, Professor Belfry, sat next to Professor McGonagall. He was nearly as fat as he was tall. Harry had wondered before if there was any physical test necessary to become an Auror. By the looks of the new professor, good physical health was most certainly not a major requirement.

Belfry looked like he might have a heart attack if he strained himself by walking too far. As ridiculous as it seemed, Harry also wondered if the man was self-conscious because he was wearing all black. Black was said to be a slimming color, after all. If anything, it gave Belfry the appearance of a great puddle of ink. His dark, watery eyes looked like inkblots as well. His hair was a lot like Snape's: black and greasy, though it was considerably shorter, and he wore it parted down the middle. His mouth was large and his lips were pale. His nose was slightly crooked. He really did look like a bulbous inkblot.

Harry wondered if he would be a better teacher than Lockhart. He was, after all, an Auror. Police were the protectors of Muggles against criminals, Aurors were the protectors of wizards. The very career of an Auror revolved around possessing an acute knowledge of how to defend oneself against dark magic. Surely this man would know what the bloody hell he was talking about. None of it would matter if Hogwarts was closed down, though.

As if to answer the questions weighing on Harry's mind, Dumbledore stood up and tapped a fork against the side of his goblet. The peeling cry of metal hitting ceramic wasn't particularly loud, yet it rang like an alarm in the silent Great Hall. All heads turned to see Dumbledore who stood on his feet, looking out at all his students a bit too cheerfully. Then again, Dumbledore's wizarding skill was "legendary". What seemed to be a morbid, foreboding, mysterious, and impossible situation to normal people was probably nothing

more than a minor, if irritating, curiosity to Dumbledore. If only he knew what he was doing. If only he wasn't old and batty. Maybe he might be able to do something helpful. Instead, he opened his mouth to launch into a monologue. Harry had a good idea about what Dumbledore would say before he even said the words.

"Good morning," said Dumbledore pleasantly. He received no response of any kind. "Since classes resume today, I would like to say a few words. All students are re-reminded that curfew is now six o'clock in the evening, promptly after dinner. Any student found roaming the halls after that time will be punished, possibly expelled." Dumbledore paused for a moment, perhaps realizing that his warning had sounded a bit too lighthearted. Or else he was so old and senile that he thought his warning had sounded sufficiently grim (which it had not), and so he was pausing to impress upon the students the grave importance of such a warning. However, when he continued, he sounded just as cheerful and carefree as he always did. "Also, I'd like to introduce your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Belfry. Most of you have undoubtedly read the article in the Daily Prophet. Professor Belfry, along with several other Aurors, has been sent here by the Ministry of Magic to investigate the Chamber of Secrets."

Dumbledore paused and gave the entire Hall a long, sweeping look. When he spoke next, his tone magically became appropriately grave enough to fit the current state of events. Harry was convinced. Dumbledore was insane.

"You all are undoubtedly wondering whether or not this school will be kept open in light of recent events. Some of you have lost a friend to petrification, others have lost friends because of concerned parents withdrawing their children from this school. I will tell you the truth. I am not sure whether or not we will make it to the end of the semester in January. Hogwarts is no longer as safe as it once was. I implore each and every one of you to be extremely cautious in the days to come. The threat that the Chamber of Secrets poses should not be underestimated in any way...."

If at all possible, Dumbledore's sobering speech quieted the Hall even more. The silence was penetrating. It was almost loud.

"Well, off to class then, pip-pip!" the headmaster called cheerfully as though the grave words he hadn't just warned all of the students that, if they weren't careful, they might be petrified.

The entire Hall awoke as students moved to gather with their classmates and be led by a teacher to their morning classes.

Through din of moving students, a slurring, whispering, hissing voice reached Harry's ears.

"Kill," it said.

Harry glanced around at the people surrounding him. None of them had seemed to notice the voice that sounded as though it had just spoken directly into his ear.

"Kill!" it said again, this time with more urgency, more fury.

Harry looked around again, trying to locate the source. Nobody else seemed to notice anything strange was occurring right in the Great Hall. No one else appeared to have heard anything.

"KILL!" the voice practically roared. Harry jumped at the sound a little. He looked around wildly and saw nothing but students wearing grim faces.

Harry reached his classmates immediately and followed them, along with Professor McGonagall, to Transfiguration. He did not speak with Draco or Blaise on the way. No one in the group spoke, in fact. Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing. Harry might've been too, if not for the voice. He strained his ears to listen for any hint of it again. It seemed to have emanated from outside the Great Hall; from the castle walls themselves. Try as he might, he heard nothing more except the footsteps of students smacking against cold stone.

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"Good morning, class," said Professor Belfry.

From the moment the first word exited his lips, Harry knew that he would absolutely despise the obese, greasy inkblot that Belfry was. The Professor's demeanor was at least ten times more pompous

than Lockhart. When he spoke to them, his tone was so condescending, Harry wondered if he actually thought them stupid enough not to notice. His voice was deep and gravely. He sounded like a he'd been smoking all his life and, on top of that, recently swallowed a cup of nails that had shredded his vocal cords. His watery, inky eyes were sharp and almost seemed to be searching for anything out of the ordinary. They settled upon Harry's scar.

"Potter," he addressed in his growling voice. "Perhaps you can tell me where you are at in the lesson plans this year? Every other class seemed to think I'm an idiot. They tried to convince me that you haven't even opened your textbooks. Said that Lockhart's been going on about his personal life for the whole year."

"Well, he has," Harry returned.

"You've got to be joking, Potter. Is this some sort of conspiracy? Are you all trying to pull the wool over my eyes? It won't work with me. I might be a substitute, but I'm not stupid. I know the games children try to play."

"Considering you had two classes before this one, and both of them told you the exact same thing, you'd think that maybe you'd look into it further," Harry snapped.

Belfry laughed a throaty laugh. "That's ridiculous. It can't be true. Lockhart had to have taught you something."

"His favorite color is lavender," Harry offered.

"My favorite color is puce," Belfry returned. "Look, Potter, either you tell me the truth or you get detention. Your choice."

"But I have told you the truth, sir," said Harry, stressing the last word with a hint of sarcasm. He liked this new, fat professor less and less by each moment.

"Potter-"

"Sir, are you really stupid enough to think that Lockhart actually had any skill with magic? Have you even met him? I told you the truth, but you're refusing to believe it."

"I've had enough of these games you children are trying to play with me!" Belfry practically shouted. His face colored slightly. "You'd think, with all that's happening in this bloody school, that you foolish children would want to learn a thing or two about defensive magic! Let's get to it then, shall we? Where did you leave off in your books?"

"We never opened them!" Harry said again. "Lockhart didn't teach us anything! Are you really that... that ignorant?"

"Out of my class, Potter. You'll be joining a few of your other classmates in detention tonight. I'm giving all of you a quiz to assess where you are in the curriculum. Since you all insist on perpetuating this childish game, I'm making this quiz worth three hundred points. That's either going to make or break your grades for probably the entire year. You fail, of course, Potter. You won't be here to take it. Get out of my class immediately, and I'll see you at five o'clock tonight in my office."

Harry was practically shaking in rage at the stupidity of this man. Was he really so moronic to believe that Lockhart had taught them something about defense against Dark Magic? Harry was positive that Lockhart didn't even possess the magical prowess necessary to cast a simple Illumination Charm. Harry picked up his books and made to walk out of the classroom. He was going to Snape about this. He probably should've gone to Snape a long time ago about Lockhart. He might have gotten Lockhart fired. Belfry was clearly just as stupid as Lockhart had been. Maybe he knew a thing or two about magic, but he was just as unintelligent. Maybe even more so. That, and he was an arrogant moron that clearly thought himself better than all the students in the class.

"Potter," Belfry said.

Harry stopped and spun very slowly to face the new Defense Professor, trying to keep his seething fury in check.

"On second thought, you'd better sit back down. What with all the dangers lurking about. I wouldn't want to lose my job." Belfry smiled a smile that plainly said he really didn't care about what ill fate might befall Harry. Belfry was just worried about his source of income.

Harry returned to his seat, trying to resist the urge to slam his books down on the desk. Belfry cleared his throat. It sounded like gravel being ground in a bucket of saliva.

"All right, then. Time for the quiz. I suggest you all try your hardest on this. Let go of this childish game you're all playing and show me what you know. If you refuse... well, it's your grade, I suppose." Belfry chuckled to himself as he rotated to face the board. He lifted up a meaty arm and gave his wand a wave. His fat jiggled from the jerking movement. Harry wanted to make a comment to Draco, but he resisted the urge. The questions for the quiz began to materialize on the board. When they had finally stopped writing themselves, there were twenty three in total.

"Here we are. These questions address every benchmark the Ministry requires second year students to meet at this point in time. You all really should have no difficulty answering them. Get to it, and be detailed! By the way, Potter, you still won't be taking the quiz."

Harry blinked three times rapidly, trying desperately to keep his anger in check. He could not, however, stop himself from saying something.

"Why?" Harry asked, trying not to sound like he was disrespecting Belfry. He failed, though. That single word was loaded with Harry's anger.

"Now, Potter, don't be rude," said Belfry. "I won't hesitate to pile some more detentions onto your tally."

"Why, sir?" Harry asked, adding the title of 'sir' and lacing it with sarcasm and anger instead.

"Because, Potter, your lack of respect and your childish arrogance, as well as your ill-fated attempt to pull the wool over my eyes deserves a bit of punishment. It shouldn't effect your grade that much, though. Smart boy like you, Potter, will have it back up in no time."

By Belfry's tone, it was clear that he was being sarcastic. It was also clear that he obviously was completely serious in his justification for punishing Harry. It was painfully obvious that Belfry was under the

impression that he was better than all of his students. He carried himself with an aura of superiority. Arrogance at its finest, thought Harry.

Nevertheless, Harry bit his lip to prevent himself from speaking and sat there, quietly seething. Belfry walked up and down the aisles of desks as his students busied themselves trying to answer questions which they knew nothing about all because Gilderoy Lockhart was an incompetent moron. Belfry was willfully choosing to close his mind to that truth. Harry couldn't imagine why. He supposed that Belfry was just one of those people that always insisted they were right, even if all evidence pointed to the contrary.

After a time, Belfry announced that the quizzing was to cease. He flicked his wand and all of the papers flew up to his desk, arranging themselves in a neat pile. Everyone appeared dejected. The fact that they were all aware of their collective failure only served to further darken the mood. The Chamber of Secrets was causing more problems than anyone could handle, and now everyone, except maybe Hermione (who always looked dejected these days, despite her soaring grades in every class), was now failing Defense Against the Dark Arts thanks to the stupid inkblot that was Bane Belfry. Brilliant, thought Harry. And Harry had a third problem to top those two. He had detention with the man that night.

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Harry was making his way, along with his class, down to the Entrance Hall where they were to proceed to their common rooms before dinner. After dinner, he was to be escorted by Belfry to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom where he would serve his detention. Belfry would then escort him down to his dormitory. Harry hadn't really had the chance to discuss this turn of events with Draco or Blaise. Nobody spoke in the halls as a kind of unwritten rule. And every single teacher was so on edge, that Harry dared not chance giving any of them reason to give him another detention just to talk about how annoyed he was with Belfry. The atmosphere was just too tense everywhere. Even Flitwick had looked fit to explode earlier that day.

Harry was trailing behind his class, led by one of the Slytherin prefects (as though prefects were better suited than regular older students to protect the younger ones from the threat of the chamber).

"Kill," said the whispering, hissing voice that Harry had heard earlier that day in the Great Hall. Harry froze in his tracks. The rest of the class, not noticing he'd stopped, continued on. Harry couldn't make himself move to follow them. He strained to listen for the tiniest sound.

"Kill," said the voice again. It was more insistent this time. Its tone gave Harry goosebumps and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. This time, however, the voice seemed to be emanating from a discernible direction. Harry listened again and heard it. He definitely thought he could pinpoint the direction. It was coming from the corridor to his left.

Harry made his way down the corridor, pressing his ear to the cold, stone wall, listening for the voice.

"Kill them!" it cried so loudly that Harry jumped. He started running then. It was coming from just a little bit further ahead.

Harry froze when he stepped in a puddle of water.

"KILL!" screamed to voice. He jumped and looked to his left to see the door to what was generally regarded as a very undesirably lavatory to use. Harry didn't exactly remember why. He thought he might've been told before by someone, but that someone would've been a girl because this was a girl's lavatory. The voice was coming from the other side of the door. He was sure of it. Harry drew his wand, gripped the handle, and very slowly opened the door.

He was greeted by a small tide of water that cascaded out into the hall. Apparently the slit between the bottom of the door and the stone floor was not wide enough for it all to seep through. Harry, adrenaline pumping, wand at the ready, stepped into the bathroom. Trying to be as quiet as possible. He shut the door behind him and looked to the left to see a row of stalls. The water seemed to be coming from a toilet near the end.

"KILL!" roared the voice so loudly that the sinks shook. Harry aimed his wand at them, expecting that a the beast might break through the walls behind at any moment. He stood there, waiting, the sound of his heart beating furiously in his ears for several long moments.

Then he heard the voice again, but it came from further away. The source was no longer in this bathroom.

Still, Harry stood there, wand out, not sure if he should leave or stay. He felt very much like a fool, as though he'd just done something incredibly stupid and had barely escaped with his life. Maybe he had.

Harry jumped at the sound of the toilet gurgling. The sound of water hitting stone, a sound that he hadn't even been aware of until it was gone, suddenly stopped. Harry felt his heart beating faster again.

Without knowing why, he slowly approached the stall near the end where the water had been issuing from. He reached the door, grasped the dirty handle, and pulled it open. There was nothing on the other side but a toilet filled to the brim. Harry noticed something inside it, however. It appeared to be a rolled-up folder, or perhaps a flimsy, leather-bound book. Curious, Harry approached the toilet and looked down inside.

There was, indeed, a rolled-up book shoved in the draining hole. The toilet gurgled loudly, causing Harry to jump, and the water level inside suddenly receded. The book appeared to have been blocking its drainage. Harry then noticed that there was a ceramic pot filled with dirt weighing down the flushing handle. It was leaning against the side of the stall for support. Harry took it off and spilled the contents on the floor. There was nothing inside, just soil.

Confused, Harry looked down at the book again. It appeared that someone had attempted to flush it down the toilet and had left a flowerpot on weighing down the handle as though it would help the toilet suck the book down into its drain. Harry wondered why on earth anyone would want to flush a book down the toilet, much less how anyone could be stupid enough to believe that it would actually work. There were much more effective ways to get rid of books. Paper burned quite well, after all.

Harry wondered what kind of a book it was, in the toilet. Someone had obviously wanted to be rid of it, but why? Why would anyone try flushing it down a toilet? They could have simply just thrown it away. It occurred to Harry that maybe he should take the book out of the toilet and have a look at it for himself. He didn't really want to reach in and grab it, though.

He stood there for a moment, thinking. For some reason, he thought this book seemed important. Mere moments ago, he'd heard the strange, murderous voice issuing from this very lavatory. Upon entering, he'd discovered a book that someone had obviously tried to dispose of. But they had failed. A book that someone wanted to throw away, and a murderous voice coming from the walls. Coincidence? Harry wasn't sure. He thought that, to be sure, he'd have to look at the book.

Harry rolled up the sleeves on his robes, crouched down before the toilet bowl, and stuck his hand in the water. It was cold, but other than that, it wasn't so bad. At least it was clean. Harry quickly grabbed the book. It required a little effort to pull it from the drain, but he did. As soon as it was gone, the water began to drain now that there was no obstruction blocking its path. Harry shook the book and shook his head. It was probably damaged beyond all repair now that it had been submerged in a toilet.

To his surprise, all the water simply fell off of it as though it was made of plastic. Quite suddenly, it was dry. Strange, Harry thought. This wasn't an ordinary book.

He looked at the front cover. It was made of fine, dark leather, and it was blank.

A book without a title...

Harry opened it to the first page.

It said, in very fine, scripted words "Property of Tom M. Riddle".

Harry's brow scrunched up as he stared at the name. It felt as though it should somehow be familiar to him, but he couldn't place it. He wondered why Tom Riddle would claim a blank book as property. Perhaps it was a diary of some sort? Harry quickly flipped through the pages of the book, searching for any sort of text. There was none to be found.

Harry almost considered dumping the book back in the toilet. He could see why someone wouldn't have any use for it. It was blank, after all. Nobody wrote in diaries nowadays anyway. Still, the way the book had magically become dry, and the odd circumstances in which he found it were compelling to Harry. He decided to keep it for

now. Maybe Draco or Blaise would know something about Tom Riddle. The name seemed so familiar to Harry. He thought it should be, but he couldn't place where he'd seen it before. Maybe he hadn't, though. Regardless of whether or not he really did know the name... it seemed ominous.

I urge you all to pretend that this is actually not a bad excuse for a new chapter and remain confident that I haven't actually forgotten ALL my plot ideas. I wrote about halfway past the 2nd Xxx about... oh... 2, 3 months ago? And then I wrote everything beyond that point today and last night. Insanity.

Chapter 26: Riddles

Upon entering a rather solemn Great Hall (though there was a muted buzz of chatter), Harry almost immediately found himself standing before a red-faced Professor McGonagall.

"Potter," addressed McGonagall through gritted teeth, "where have you been?"

Harry grimaced. He hadn't really considered the consequences on leaving his escort (and his escort had been Professor McGonagall) to investigate the voice. McGonagall was probably the most rigidly uptight teacher at Hogwarts, and prone to overreaction. At least, in Harry's opinion, the attitude that McGonagall was displaying now was overreaction. As skilled as McGonagall was, even Dumbledore hadn't a clue as to what was causing the petrifications and the attacks that had taken place over the course of the school year up until that point. Harry doubted that an escort, even one as skilled as McGonagall, would be able to protect the students from attack, especially if caught off guard. So, he really didn't see the sense in making such a fuss about it. If he was going to be attacked, then he was going to be attacked. He doubted McGonagall would be able to save him any better than he would be able to save himself. After all, she didn't know what it was that was attacking students. It was probably something that all the experience in the world couldn't prepare her for, so she was just as ready as he was.

But McGonagall was one of the strictest purveyors of Hogwart's law. On top of that, she was probably just as frightened as everyone else in the castle. Harry chided himself. He should have seen this coming. He should have caught up with the class before McGonagall had noticed he was gone. Instead, he'd stopped to stare at a book lying in a toilet for about five minutes. Harry's hands clutched tighter around the small diary in his hands.

"Sorry, Professor," said Harry. "I dropped something important and I had to go back and get it."

McGonagall tossed her hands in the air in an exaggerated gesture of irritated exasperation. She looked to be at her wit's end.

"In all my years of teaching, that excuse is so overused it's become a cliché!"

Harry blinked in surprise. He didn't think that teachers often led groups of students down corridors. Such a thing hadn't occurred at all during his entire first year at Hogwarts. Therefore it was very unlikely that anyone would ever have even been put in the position to use the excuse Harry had just come up with. Although it was a bad excuse, and he knew it. McGonagall was definitely at her wits end.

"Sorry, Professor," said Harry. He didn't think there was much else to say.

"Well, I should hope so!" snapped McGonagall. "You jeopardized your own safety, Potter! You know very well what's been going on in this school. You could have been... attacked!"

"I know, Professor." Harry did know all too well. The voice he'd heard from the bathroom was connected to the Chamber of Secrets. Harry was positive. The voice was also bloodthirsty.

McGonagall nodded several times in rapid succession. "Oh yes, I'm sure you do, Potter. This was a serious blunder on your part! I might expect this sort of behavior from first years who don't know enough about magic to fear for their safety! Now I'm not entirely sure that you understand the seriousness of this—this dawdling, Potter!"

"I do, Professor," said Harry. He knew very well the serious consequences of being caught off guard. He had no desire to be petrified, and he was sure that there was no one else in Hogwarts that wanted to see the end of this nightmare with the Chamber of Secrets more than he did. Threats had been made that the school would close if such dangerous events continued to occur. Harry couldn't take that.

"I've half a mind to give you detention, Potter!" McGonagall practically shrieked. Many heads in the Great Hall were now turned in the Professor's direction. But she had tunnel vision and it was focused intently on Harry. "But I understand that Professor Belfry has already given you detention and that'll have to do! I'm far too busy to use my time to punish students for this sort of reckless nonsense! Fifty points from Slytherin!"

Harry winced inwardly at the looks McGonagall's shouted point deduction earned him. McGonagall looked as though she might launch into another long-winded rant. She steeled herself, however, turned on her heel, and strode off to the staff table shaking her head. Her fists were clenched at her sides. Most of the student body watched Harry as he took his seat at the Slytherin table. Harry received several glares from his House-mates, but he mostly ignored them. He was about miffed about them, of course. He'd just been shouted at by McGonagall in front of the entire Great Hall; publicly embarrassed. Anyway, fifty points from Slytherin wasn't going to make much of a difference. They were in the lead for the House Cup regardless, and Harry really didn't think that the Cup was all that important at the moment. Of course, it was the nature of the Slytherins to be this way. Harry thought that they were simply allowing themselves to get mad, not because of their nature, but because it was comforting to revert back to whatever parts of their nature made them feel normal when they were scared. Harry saw people do things like that a lot these days.

The quiet buzz of chatter in the Great Hall resumed after Harry took a seat across the table from Draco and Blaise.

"What the bloody hell was that, Potter?" Draco snapped. "Where did you go? You just... vanished!"

Harry shook his head and glanced up at the staff table to see Belfry stuffing his face full of all manner of food. The plate lying before him was piled high with nearly every entrée and side dish that Hogwarts had to offer on this particular night. Harry scowled in disgust. He could hardly believe this man was an Auror.

Harry ate his dinner quickly. Neither Blaise nor Draco said anything further. Harry was not in a talking mood, and obviously the anger he felt was palpable. He was angry with a great number of things. Primarily, the idea that Hogwarts might close because of this Chamber business both frightened him and infuriated him. Then there was Belfry, and that was self-explanatory. On top of it all, there was the voice from the walls. The voice didn't really anger him. In fact, he wasn't sure if he felt scared about it or not. Curiosity was the overwhelming feeling where the voice was concerned.

Harry had to find out what the voice was. It was connected to the Chamber. And he also planned to find out what the diary he'd fished

out of the toilet was. The thing had earned him a rather embarrassing scolding from McGonagall, so he hoped it was worth it.

Harry jumped at the sound of Dumbledore tapping a spoon against his goblet. The peal cut through the pitiful buzz of chatter in the Great Hall and gleaned the attention of every student. Dumbledore stood and cleared his throat loudly. Harry sighed in exasperation. These pre-bedtime-talks of Dumbledore's were becoming a nightly occurrence.

"I have a few quick announcements before bedtime," said the Headmaster. "First, we have decided to cancel the entire Quidditch season."

There was a slight pause, as Dumbledore's words registered within the minds of the student body. And then a collective groan was issued. The Weasley twins, Fred and George, immediately stood to protest. Dumbledore and McGonagall stopped them with a shared, intense look. Harry simply felt numb. The end of Quidditch somehow felt like a prelude to something far worse.

"Also, everyone is re-reminded to exercise extreme caution while walking the corridors," said Dumbledore in a manner that was meant to be grave. The words, however, had lost their affect a long time ago because almost every staff member gave them a similar lecture before the end of almost every class. Caution was embedded in their minds, but it had been forcibly pounded into their conscious, and the severity of the danger that the warning was meant to convey had diminished as a result.

Dumbledore then dismissed them all to their dormitories. Anger about the cancellation of Quidditch served as a good discussion topic. The volume of conversations rose to a peak it hadn't reached for a very long time. No one seemed very passionate with their anger, however. Fear seemed to numb every emotion. Besides, arguing against the cancellation of Quidditch was sure to provoke an explosion from Professor McGonagall, and there was also the small fact that such arguing would be futile.

Futile, Harry thought, like attempting to follow his class to their dormitories. Belfry had fixed Harry with a look as Dumbledore dismissed the students. The look had said something akin to: "Get

over here, Potter. I'll be escorting you to detention now."

Harry wanted to turn and walk away from Belfry very much, but instead he started toward the staff table, leaving Draco and Blaise without a word.

Belfry met Harry half way between Harry's spot at the Slytherin table and the platform upon which sat the staff table. Belfry's copious amount of body fat jiggled beneath his robes. Harry thought a diet would serve the Auror well.

"All right, Potter," snapped Belfry in his growling, gravelly voice. "My office."

Harry didn't say anything. He waited and fell in step behind the obese professor. Belfry slowly led the way through the throng of exiting students toward the Grand Staircase. As they were wading through the crowd, Harry noted that Belfry's enormous girth was useful for something. It made Belfry a kind of human plow. Everyone moved to get out of his way, lest they be crushed by his massive belly. Harry might have found such a phenomenon comical if only he weren't in what felt like a numb, but angry, stupor of nothing. Nothing but numbness pierced by occasional bursts of anger at thoughts that didn't sit well with him.

Harry and Belfry made their way to the third floor, to Belfry's office. Once there, Belfry planted himself on the extra large chair behind his desk, and gestured for Harry to take a seat on one of the straight-backed, uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs before it. Harry noted that the office of the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's office had changed a lot since Lockhart was now petrified. Belfry was a simple man, it appeared. The office was bare of everything except the essentials, and most of those essentials were black. Black was just Belfry's color. Harry resisted the urge to snicker at the idea that'd popped into his head upon first meeting Belfry: that Belfry used the color black to try and making himself look slimmer. That was an impossible task.

Belfry opened a drawer on his desk and looked at Harry with his inky, black eyes.

"Now, Potter, your punishment. You'll be-"

Harry, however, didn't find out what he'd be doing. Belfry was interrupted by a knock on his door. Harry felt vaguely relieved because of the distraction, and then he lapsed back into the stupor he'd been feeling for a while.

Belfry growled in frustration. It sounded like the Dursley's garbage disposal; smelled like it, too. Belfry had terrible breath.

"Enter," Belfry barked.

Harry turned a little to watch as the door opened and Dumbledore stepped in.

"Ah, Bane," said Dumbledore, addressing Belfry by his first name in an overtly casual manner. Too casual, even for the senile old man, Harry thought. It hadn't escaped Harry's attention that Dumbledore's eyes, upon his entering the room, had locked on Harry, if only for a brief moment.

"Albus," acknowledged Belfry. Even though he'd said only one word, his voice simply exuded rudeness; rather like a skunk exuded its overpowering stench. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"I'm afraid we have an urgent matter that requires the attention of an Auror. You are the resident Auror on campus, so I've come to fetch you," said the Headmaster in a cheerful manner that was very off-putting. After all, he'd just told Belfry there was an urgent matter to attend to, and yet he said it as if he were simply extending an invitation to join him for a bit of tea.

"Urgent matter, you say?" said Belfry, clearly annoyed. The professor's inky eyes flicked to Harry for a moment, and narrowed. Harry felt a slight urge to smile, but he didn't. "Can't it wait? Potter here is serving detention."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "I'm afraid not," he said. Harry wondered if the senile old man had just now noticed that Belfry was actually an arrogant idiot that found enjoyment in the meaningless punishment of students.

Belfry grunted. At that moment, Snape entered the room and glanced at Harry. His eyebrows drew together for a moment, but then he looked to Belfry.

"I'm afraid this matter involves some rather sensitive information," said Dumbledore, his eyes looking to Harry for a moment. "If you will come with me, Bane, I will explain it to you fully. Severus, kindly escort Mr. Potter to the Slytherin Common Room and then return to me."

"Yes, Headmaster," said Snape. "Come along, Potter."

"Wait a moment," interjected Belfry. "Potter, I'm feeling generous. Instead of serving out the punishment I had planned for you at a later time, I'm just going to assign you an essay. You're going to write about what you should've learned so far this year in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Make it a foot long, if you please. You have a week from tonight."

Harry felt like rolling his eyes at the tone of Belfry's voice. He was so pompous and egotistical, and yet he didn't seem to have much bite to go with his bark, so to speak. Harry suspected that Belfry wasn't actually very creative with punishments, and that had been planning to assign that essay no matter what. He'd only alluded to a worse punishment because it gave him an inexplicable (not to mention unwarranted) ego boost, and, with that, a cheap thrill.

Without a further word, Belfry followed Dumbledore out of his office. Snape looked at Harry for a moment with one raised eyebrow, then he gestured for Harry to follow him. Snape swiftly turned and exited Belfry's office, his robes billowing out like black smoke behind him. Harry followed in his wake, the door shut on its own accord right after he crossed the threshold.

"Potter," said Snape quietly as they started down the corridor, making their way to the Grand Staircase.

"Professor," Harry returned after it became evident that Snape was not going to continue.

"Why exactly were you sitting in Professor Belfry's office?"

"Because Professor Belfry gave me detention."

"Naturally, Potter. What I want to know is why Professor Belfry gave you detention."

"Right," said Harry. "He wanted to give us a quiz on what we've learned so far this year. But we haven't learned anything. All Lockhart did was have discussions about his books and his personal life. I told Professor Belfry and he thought I was trying to trick him to get out of work."

"That must be one of the most ridiculous things I have heard in my years at Hogwarts," Snape said. "I believe you, Potter. Lockhart was under-qualified, to say the least. Bane Belfry is a pompous idiot. Rather than knowledge, his head contains a lot of hot air. His enormous body is now fit to burst because his ego has swelled so much. I believe I shall have a chat with him." Snape had a talent of making those kinds of things sound like grim threats.

"The position should've gone to me," Snape muttered so quietly that Harry wondered if Snape had meant for him to hear it.

"You would've been a damn lot better than either of them," said Harry, hesitating on the word 'damn' because he wasn't sure if Snape would approve of profanity. Several of the Professors in Hogwarts didn't tolerate it, claiming that it was highly unprofessional and young wizards studying in Britain's greatest magical school ought to know how to conduct themselves better. At least, McGonagall had given them a stern lecture similar to that when they were first years. Instead of berating Harry, however, Snape smiled and said: "Indeed."

They reached the Grand Staircase and began their descent, making their way to the Entrance Hall where they then entered a narrow corridor that descended into the dungeons. They did not speak on the way down. It seemed a long, somewhat awkward walk. Snape appeared to be absorbed in his own thoughts. Harry remembered someone telling him that Snape fancied the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. That now struck Harry as a bit of an understatement. The way Snape had said "indeed" cemented it into Harry's mind. Snape was very confident that he was the best candidate and he wanted that position more than anything else.

Harry and Snape came to a halt before the dungeon wall that opened into the Slytherin Common Room. Before letting Harry enter, Snape spoke.

"Now, Potter, I want you to remain in the common room and not cause trouble. Your overabundance of curiosity is a fault. Reign it in. Also, write that essay. While Belfry may be an arrogant fool, he at least got something right. This essay is for your own good. You need to learn Defensive Magic."

"I know, sir," said Harry. "I've been trying to study what I could from real books while Lockhart was teaching us, but I didn't make it as far as I should be."

Snape appeared genuinely surprised. "A wise decision, Potter. Very wise." Snape paused, as if trying to decide whether or not he should make another remark. What he said next was unremarkable, so apparently he held back whatever he was thinking. "Go now, Potter. I have things to attend to."

Snape waited as Harry said the password and the wall pulled back to allow him to enter the common room. Harry turned to watch it shut behind him. Snape turned on his heel and disappeared into the shadows of the dungeons just as the closing wall finally cut off Harry's view of him.

Harry stepped into the common room. It was relatively full of students. None of them really paid him much attention. Most were too occupied with conversations or homework to acknowledge his presence. Draco and Blaise started toward him almost immediately. Harry wasn't in the mood to answer questions, but he figured he had better appease them because he doubted he'd want to do it later.

So, he told them the story. He explained the situation with Tom Riddle's diary, the book he'd fished out of a toilet. He told them what happened with Belfry. They asked questions, of course. Draco seemed to be in the beginning stages of a long winded tirade, complete with oaths about what he'd have his father do. Harry endured it. He wanted to get into the dormitory so he could work on his essay and further examine Tom Riddle's diary.

After a short discussion, Harry left Draco and Blaise and walked swiftly to the dormitory. Solitude, after all that had happened today,

was peaceful. Harry sat down at the desk next to his bed, lit the oil lamp upon it, and pulled a fresh piece of parchment as well as an ink bottle and quill from his bags. He set them on the desk and then sat the diary on top of the parchment.

Harry opened the book to a blank page. He felt a slight bit of disappointment at seeing that there was nothing written on any of the pages, except for the name of Tom M. Riddle on the very first. He'd already noticed that the entire book was blank, of course, but still, he'd been hoping to glean answers from it. Now that hope seemed empty. After all, what use was a blank book? What could it possibly tell him? All it really revealed was that its owner was called Tom Riddle. Such information was arbitrary. The name Tom Riddle did seem vaguely familiar to Harry, but he was sure it had nothing to do with the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry closed the book and ran his hand over the smooth, black, leather cover. He sat there for a time, just looking at it. It was mesmerizing, in a way. The way the light of the oil lamp refracted off the surface of the fine leather ensnared Harry's focus.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, just looking at the cover, but he finally shook himself out of that entranced state. His heart was beginning to beat a little faster. That feeling hadn't been normal, and he was sure of it. There was something very strange about this book.

Harry recalled that it had magically become dry only seconds after he'd retrieved it from the toilet. A curious phenomenon, he thought. He wondered if it would reject ink from its pages the way it had rejected water. Perhaps that was the reason it was blank.

Harry dipped his quill in the ink and opened the diary to a random, blank page. He paused for a moment, wondering what to write. He decided he'd sign his name. So he did so in several, fast, precise, sure movements.

He sat there for a moment, staring at his signature upon the otherwise blank page of the diary. For a moment, nothing happened. And then his name quickly faded as though the pages of the diary had absorbed the ink.

That was interesting, Harry thought. That certainly proved that the book wasn't normal. Harry dipped the quill into the ink again,

intending to write something else, but before he could touch the tip of the quill to the blank paper, writing began to appear, seemingly on its own accord.

Harry read the text, written in a unique, neat, classical, older script.

It said: "Is your name Harry Potter?"

Harry sat there for a moment, staring at the text, hardly believing that it was asking him a question. He'd never known a book to speak before; not in a literal sense anyway.

Harry decided he would answer it and see what happened. The question faded as he began to write his response.

He wrote a simple "yes".

A few seconds passed, and then a response appeared.

"Good evening, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle."

"Good evening, Tom Riddle. Who exactly are you?" Harry responded.

"The owner of this diary," came the vague response.

"I can see that," Harry returned. "What is this diary? I've never seen another book like it."

"Well, you could say this diary was like a project of mine when I attended Hogwarts many years ago. Amidst all the chaos in those times, I had to find something constructive to occupy myself with. You could say that this diary is a kind of preservation vessel for a memory. The memory of me. It's a conventional yet unconventional diary in that sense."

"I see. What kind of chaos went on when you were in school?"

"Those times were rather dark, Harry. Back then it was proven that a myth was real, shall we say. A Muggle born witch died as a result."

Harry suddenly felt heart rate increase a little. "What happened to her?"

"She was killed by the monster that is said to live in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's eyes widened. He was momentarily too stunned to write anything. He composed himself quickly.

"What do you know about the Chamber?"

"Quite a lot of things, actually."

"Can you tell me?"

"No."

Harry paused for a moment. Feeling the encroaching bitterness of disappointment.

"No?" Harry wrote.

"No. It would take a page or two to explain properly. It would be better if I could just show you."

Harry was about to ask how Tom Riddle would go about doing such a thing when the door opened and Draco and Blaise entered. Harry shut the book swiftly and dropped it in his bag without really knowing why. He cursed Draco and Blaise inwardly with every nasty word he could come up with. They had interrupted him at a crucial time! He wondered if he should show them the diary, but that would lead to too many questions; questions he didn't have the patience to answer. He couldn't show it to them. He'd have to wait until they were asleep, and then he would return to chatting with the memory of Tom Riddle.

Draco attempted to make a bit of conversation as he readied himself for bed. Harry's replies were short. He wasn't in the mood for small talk. He wanted answers immediately, and Tom Riddle could give him those answers.

Draco and Blaise stripped down and got into their pajamas. Harry followed suit, and very quickly all three of them were lying in their respective beds. Draco waved his wand at the oil lamp, muttering something, and it flickered out. The dim flame had been the only

light in the room. Now that it was gone, everything became pitch black.

Harry sighed heavily and prepared himself to lie there on his bed for a time. He listened carefully, trying to hear the breathing of Draco and Blaise, waiting until the rhythms evened out and grew slower with the onset of sleep. All the while, his mind raced.

Thoughts of Tom Riddle and the diary permeated his mind and consumed his entire consciousness. He speculated for a while about the nameless danger lurking within the Chamber of Secrets. He heard the screams of the mudblood that was killed. They were so loud and piercing, so real that Harry jumped.

All was quiet for a time as he sat there on his bed in the darkness.

Quite suddenly he was standing, no longer sitting.

He was standing in a bathroom. Water was overflowing from the toilets behind the closed doors of the stalls. Harry walked through it, his feet creating splashes that echoed loudly in the confines of the bathroom.

He slowly approached the last stall as a jet of red liquid began to stain the water the toilet behind the closed door was producing. Harry felt his heart hammering in his throat as he approached the door, extending a hand. He closed his fingers around the icy metal of the handle, and pulled back.

He screamed at the site of the young, bespectacled girl sitting on the closed lid of the toilet. Her skin was ghost-white, her eyes were red, and blood trickled out of two grievous, roundish wounds that had been ripped into her delicate, mudblood throat.

Harry awoke with a start. He sat in his bed, back straight, for several long moments. Cold sweat trickled down his cheek, reminding him of the blood in the water. He immediately wiped it away, grunting a little bit at the thought of it.

He glanced around, Draco and Blaise had already left. It must be morning.

Damn it! Harry cursed himself for falling asleep. He needed answers. Obviously the little information Tom Riddle had given him was affecting his mind in horrible, horrible ways. He knew it was only a dream, but he wondered if that was how the mud blood really had died. He wondered if she'd been found like that, with two bloody wounds torn into her neck.

Harry shivered and moved to get dressed and gather up his things. He would write in the diary later. For now, he needed to have a drink of pumpkin juice or something. His skin felt clammy, and his eyes seemed to be permanently opened as wide as possible.

Harry made his way to the Great Hall to find Draco and Blaise sitting in their usual spot. Draco held a copy of the Daily Prophet in his hands, and was making a scene about something on the front of the page. Harry took a seat across from Draco and Blaise and grabbed his goblet, it was full of pumpkin juice. He took a long drink and then set the goblet down in the table.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, referring to the article Draco was reading. His voice sounded a little shaky to him, but Draco didn't seem to notice.

"They found the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets last time and sent him off to Azkaban!" said Draco excitedly.

Harry felt his heart begin to beat with what seemed like a feeling of relief, but it was mixed with trepidation. For some reason unfathomable to him, he didn't have a good feeling about this.

"Who is it?" Harry asked.

Draco tossed him the paper. He caught it and looked at the headline of the front page.

His trepidation immediately overpowered his relief. It wasn't possible. The writings on the wall said that the Heir of Slytherin had returned, and there was simply no way that Hagrid was that person. Harry knew it in his gut that the gamekeeper had wrongly been taken into custody and sent to Azkaban.

He couldn't imagine the big jolly oaf opening the Chamber of Secrets. The image of the dead mud blood imprinted in his mind

immediately flashed in his vision. Hagrid couldn't be the cause of such a grisly scene. It somehow didn't add up. He had to talk to Tom Riddle now.

The Great Hall went silent as Hermione Granger stood up, sobbing very conspicuously, and strode out the door.

Harry wondered...

Chapter 27: Scatterbrained

At first, Harry wondered if Hermione was crying because of the name Azkaban. Certainly, the name of the infamous wizard prison elicited a reaction from a large portion of the student body. That was a place to be feared, thought Harry. Having grown up ignorant of all things magical, Harry knew no specifics about Azkaban. He vaguely remembered hearing about it before from somewhere, but he could not recall the source of the information. Faintly, he remembered that Azkaban was said to be a terrible place. The worst criminals were sent to Azkaban, and turned to madness within its walls. Harry had definitely heard that somewhere before. It was said that only insane witches and wizards were sent to Azkaban, because only insane witches and wizards would ever take the risk of being convicted of a crime that could possibly result in a sentence to Azkaban. The mere thought of having to endure even a day in that terrible prison was enough to deter most people from committing crime, or so it was said. Harry thought it was probably an exaggeration. Still, he wondered if Hermione believed it. That would be why she was crying.

Obviously, Hermione would have already studied Azkaban. If the truth about the place was as ugly as the rumors, then perhaps she really had good reason to cry. Plus, she is a girl, thought Harry. Girls cry over foolish things. But Hermione wasn't foolish, despite all her shortcomings. She was a mudblood and a Gryffindor. Yet, despite these two unfortunate facts, she was still one of the smartest people in the second year class, if not the smartest. She was nowhere near as ignorant as Harry sometimes thought her.

He remembered the ordeal with the Philosopher's Stone last year. Hermione and Ron Weasley had both known about the situation before Harry himself had. Weasley wasn't to be given any credit, however. Any idiot could deduce that it had been Hermione who had done all the discovering. Harry wondered if she knew something about the present, rather precarious situation Hogwarts now found itself in: the new ordeal involving the Chamber of Secrets. That, along with the fact that Hermione was friendly toward Hagrid, as far as Harry could tell, would also explain the crying.

Hermione was insightful. It seemed very likely she might know something about Hagrid that no one else did. Perhaps he could be proven innocent. Perhaps Hermione knew he was innocent. Or, perhaps she was merely crying for the loss of her friend as he was

shipped away to Azkaban. Harry had no way of knowing for sure. He hoped that Hermione knew something important, something he could work off of. Things were getting worse at Hogwarts, and Harry did not want to return to the Dursleys.

Wishing for a solution, of course, would get Harry nowhere. He had to investigate, and an opportunity had arisen in the form of a sobbing mudblood. The disembodied voice had gleaned Harry that intriguing diary of Tom Riddle's. That was a promising lead, but he couldn't access it right now. He could, however, speak to Hermione. Besides that diary, he really had nothing else to go on. Harry thought that he should investigate a possible lead, no matter how unlikely or insignificant it might seem, if one was presented to him.

He would speak to Hermione. He wondered if he ought to try subtly. He didn't see how that would work, though. In order to manipulate people, one needed control of a variable or two, and Harry had control of none. He wasn't particularly friendly with Hermione either, so acts of subtly were doomed to fail. He decided there that he would simply ask Hermione why she was crying, and what she thought about Hagrid being responsible for the Chamber of Secrets.

And then the bell rang, signaling the start of the classes. All at once, the collective student body stood to their feet, gathered their belongings, and left the Great Hall in a silence that was oppressive. Harry made no attempt to navigate the traffic of students in order to reach Hermione. He would speak to her soon enough.

Draco led the way to Charms. He was silent for once. In contrast to the rest of the students, Draco's demeanor was light, and he was even smiling slightly to himself. It was no secret that Draco was not fond of Hagrid. Harry had listened to a number of Draco's tirades about the stupidity of the gamekeeper. He neither agreed nor disagreed with Draco's thoughts on Hagrid. Harry had always simply felt neutral toward the gamekeeper. He was pleasant enough; perhaps a little odd, and sometimes even slightly disturbing. Now, Harry felt sympathy for Hagrid, because, while Hagrid might be tall, oafish, and perhaps a touch demented, he was really harmless. Harry knew for certain that nothing the gamekeeper had done could warrant his arrest. Harry wasn't even entirely sure that Hagrid could perform much more than simple magic as he'd never seen the giant man attempt any. Every other staff member of Hogwarts, save Filch, who Harry had heard before was a Squib (and he'd learned what a

Squib was thanks to Draco), regularly displayed feats of magic and carried a wand. Neither Hagrid nor Filch seemed to own a wand.

Being incapable of performing simple magic, Harry just didn't understand how anyone could think it was Hagrid that had opened the Chamber of Secrets, and committed crimes that even Dumbledore didn't fully understand. The idea was preposterous. He couldn't understand why the Ministry would choose to signal Hagrid out. Hagrid was simply the most unlikely person imaginable. If the Ministry really was interested in apprehending this Heir of Slytherin that was responsible for the crimes Hagrid had been charged with, they might start by putting Belfry to a better use than teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts... although, Harry doubted the man was really qualified for anything beyond the position of a janitor. He was far too arrogant and pig-headed to serve well as an Auror or a teacher.

Harry arrived at the Charms classroom and took his seat. He took his time spreading all the supplies he would need for the class upon his desk space, but included something that wasn't necessary: Riddle's Diary. Much like his desire to speak to Hermione about Hagrid and the Chamber, he desperately wanted to communicate with Tom Riddle again. He had two potentially brilliant leads to follow at this point. It was ironic that the very school he was trying to save from closing was holding him back from discovering the truth about that which tormented it by requiring him to go to class.

Harry cracked his knuckles against the desk impatiently, glancing from the diary to an expressionless Hermione on the other side of the room as Flitwick took his time climbing up the stack of books he used as platform in order to boost his height.

After Flitwick reached the top, he began the lesson for the day. His usual energy was subdued and he wasn't particularly enthusiastic. Harry found Flitwick's demeanor odd, and he half wondered if the tiny professor knew something the rest of them did not. Harry didn't concentrate on speculations founded on nothing, however, he had too many things to worry about with better evidence backing them up. He anxiously awaited the bell that would dismiss the class. He intended to intercept Hermione before second period. Patience was a Slytherin trait, but Harry had none.

After an eternal lecture on some sort of theory of Charms no one actually cared about (not even Flitwick, who loved his career), the bell finally rang. Harry had already gathered his things beforehand in anticipation of the end of the class. He swept past Draco and Blaise without a word, and navigated his way through the throng of students sluggishly gathering by the door, waiting for Flitwick to descend from his tower of books and lead them to their next class.

Harry pushed around a few Gryffindors who didn't even take a second look at him, and reached Hermione. He was greeted by a venomous glare.

"Er... morning," he said in greeting. Those were the first words he'd spoken to Hermione since they'd fallen out of one another's good graces after the the incident with the Philosopher's Stone.

Hermione said nothing. She looked intently at the door, ignoring Harry's existence.

"I have something to ask you," Harry whispered. It was too quiet in the Charms classroom, and he did not want to be overheard. Flitwick brushed past his leg, muttering something, and then the door burst open with a loud bang that seemed to jar everyone awake from the sort of numb, walking slumber that had been weighing upon them all class.

Hermione moved into line with the students following Flitwick, and Harry dodged Neville Longbottom to get a good walking position next to Hermione.

"This is important," Harry said, trying to stress the severity of the word 'important'.

"Oh, really?" snapped Hermione. Harry paused a beat, expecting an additional sarcastic jab, but none came.

"Yes, really," said Harry. "I want to know what you know."

"Try the library," Hermione suggested hotly.

"No, not about school," Harry returned irritably. "I'm talking about Hagrid."

Hermione's gait faltered slightly, and her stony face melted into a frown. "What about Hagrid?"

"I think..." Harry began, trailing off as he glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to him. Draco and Blaise were, but they were further back, and out of earshot so long as he spoke quietly. He ignored the looks they gave him. "I think that you know Hagrid is innocent."

"Of course I know he's innocent!" Hermione returned, somewhat incredulous, as though Hagrid's innocence was a given fact, and it was not to be questioned.

"I think he is too," said Harry.

"Well, I think—I mean... what?"

"Shocking, yeah?" Harry asked sarcastically. "What I want to know, Granger, is why you think he's innocent. Do you have evidence?"

"Well... I mean. He's Hagrid, H—Potter. You don't know him as well as I do. And, as a matter of fact, I do have evidence."

"I thought you might. I want to know what it is."

"And why on earth should I trust you with anything, Potter?"

"I don't know, Granger, maybe because I helped stop Voldemort from taking the Philosopher's Stone? I don't want Hogwarts to shut down. I can't go back to those filthy—" Harry paused a moment, seeing the look on Hermione's face, "—the Dursleys."

Hermione groaned in frustration. "I could have better evidence!" said Hermione a bit too loudly. Harry hastily motioned for her to bring down the volume a bit by waving his hand like a maniac. He realized that probably wasn't a great idea since it would garner even more attention. They walked for a while with the class in silence. Quietly and seamlessly, they slowed their pace and fell in at the very back of the line, where they were even less likely to be overheard. Plus, nobody could watch them without their knowledge.

"What do you mean you could have better evidence?" Harry asked.

"Hagrid said something before they took him away to Azkaban. It was like he already knew."

"How did he know he was going to be taken away?"

"I think Dumbledore must have known and hinted at it or something. Oh, Harry! Speaking of Dumbledore, I believe it's only a matter of time before the Ministry takes him and replaces him with another Auror or something! That'll be the final straw, too. I just know it. When Dumbledore is gone, things will get much worse, and then they really will close Hogwarts down!"

"That won't happen," said Harry tonelessly. It was just an empty statement of reassurance that sounded very hollow to even Harry. "What did Hagrid say before they took him?"

"Something about spiders," whispered Hermione. "I've been researching the Chamber of Secrets. I haven't been finding much, but Hagrid must know something. He said 'follow the spiders'."

They reached McGonagall's classroom and had to cut their conversation short. Harry took a seat in the back while Hermione sat in the front. Draco sat next to Harry and Blaise took a seat in front of him.

"What the bloody hell are you thinking, Potter?" Draco demanded. "What did you say to that filthy mudblood?"

"I'll tell you later," Harry snapped a bit too loudly. McGonagall sent a stern look his way. Draco scowled at Harry and began to actually take notes, scribbling a little too intently on his parchment.

Harry spent a very long time staring at Riddle's Diary on his desk, tuning out McGonagall's lecture. He was at a loss, and his thoughts were being pulled in a thousand different directions. Things had culminated into a time bomb which had exploded into a complex field of shrapnel that was made up of very few solid facts, a couple half-educated guesses, and a mutilated pile of pure speculation.

"What is it, Ms. Granger?" Professor McGonagall suddenly demanded very shrilly.

"I'm sorry for interrupting, Professor, but you were talking about the properties transfiguring an ant into a common garden spider."

"Yes, and I thought I was making myself very clear. We've been studying this subject for the past two weeks. Of course, none of you are even remotely ready to attempt it!" McGonagall seemed quite on edge to Harry.

"You have been making yourself very clear, Professor," said Hermione respectfully. "But I have a question about spiders."

"We have very little time left, Ms. Granger. I need to go over one more important fact. I suggest you ask after class."

Spiders, thought Harry. Hagrid had told Hermione something about spiders. Harry wondered what on earth Professor McGonagall could tell Hermione about spiders or what following spiders even had to do with the Chamber of Secrets. Harry had assumed that, if animals were involved with the Chamber, they would be snakes since the Chamber was supposedly constructed by Salazar Slytherin.

McGonagall ended her lecture about ants and spiders with a fact that Harry thought was relatively minor considering she'd been stressing it for the past week. The pronunciation of the incantation was of vital importance. Without proper pronunciation, a cataclysmic series of events could occur on an entirely molecular level, resulting in a fire, an explosion, or an exponential multiplication of some sort, depending upon how much power was intended when the incantation was spoken, and also varying with the size and color of the ant. She was only telling them this because the pronunciation was particularly difficult since it was a relatively newly invented spell and second years always had trouble with it and she did not want another bloody colony of ants roaming through the classroom.

Harry sighed as the bell rang and Hermione leaped up to corner Professor McGonagall with her question.

"Wait a moment, please!" McGonagall shouted as the class began to gather by the door. She then turned her attention to Hermione.

Harry slowly gathered his possessions as Hermione launched into a discussion with McGonagall that he could not hear. Draco seemed intent upon staying right next to Harry, but eventually became

annoyed by Harry's slow progress and left him to join a group of Slytherins to rant. He seemed angry. So did Blaise. Harry did not care. He had neither the time nor the patience to explain anything about the Chamber of Secrets. He didn't need their help. They would only cause him trouble. He could figure this out on his own. He just needed to pull a few strings and get Hermione to divulge what she knew.

McGonagall brushed past him and made her way to the door which she opened and then ordered the class to stay behind her as she left the classroom. Harry strode toward Hermione and they fell in at the back of the line.

"What did you ask her?" Harry demanded.

"I asked her if spiders were connected to the Chamber of Secrets in any way."

"And?"

"She asked me if I'd been reading old Prophet articles in the Restricted Section?"

"What the bloody hell does that mean?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have been reading those articles. She gave me a missing piece."

"What did she tell you, then?"

"Hagrid was arrested when he was still a student here, back when the Chamber was first opened and that a Muggle born girl died. I already knew that. What I didn't know was that the Aurors suspected that he was caring for an Acromantula. The article was vague about what type of beast Hagrid was looking after. Allegedly, an Acromantula killed that girl."

"Granger, what exactly is an Acromantula? Some sort of giant spider?"

"That's exactly what it is, actually."

"But that doesn't make any sense at all."

"What doesn't?"

"Acromantulas. That's just another sign that Hagrid was and still is innocent. This Chamber of Secrets was supposedly built by Salazar Slytherin, right?"

"Right."

"Well, what the bloody hell would Slytherin want with spiders? Snakes seem more likely."

"I suppose you're right," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Snakes are the symbol of the Slytherin House, and Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth."

"A what?"

"A Parselmouth. Wizards that can talk to snakes."

Harry very nearly tripped over his own two feet. "Wizards can talk to snakes?"

"Not all wizards," said Hermione. "Parselmouths are very rare. I've only read about a few. Salazar Slytherin was one, so was Herpo the Foul, and of course You-Know-Who was a very famous Parselmouth. It's very rare, though. Anyway, I suppose that makes a lot of sense, Harry. If there is a beast in the Chamber of Secrets, it's likely some kind of snake, and Hagrid and his Acromantula were used as scapegoats back then and probably right now."

"Er..." said Harry, trailing off. He was still walking next to Hermione, but his mind was in a different place. He was suddenly back in the Muggle world, in a zoo. He was partaking (if it could really be described in such a manner) in a birthday celebration of Dudley's, back before he'd even known about wizards or witches or Voldemort or secret chambers. He saw Dudley, his fat face pressed up against a glass barrier, staring into the habitat of a large python. Harry had been angry at Dudley. He remembered wishing something terrible. Then the glass had vanished and Dudley had fallen into the snake habitat.

He'd caused a ruckus, the stupid pig, and that snake had escaped from captivity. It had slithered past Harry and whispered "thankssss". At the time, Harry had been sure he was just hearing things. He'd stupidly said something back, and the snake had looked like it understood. Now he wondered if he was also a Parselmouth. How he could talk to snakes without any knowledge of their... language, however, Harry did not understand.

"Potter!" snapped Hermione.

"What?"

"What's the matter? You look ill."

"It's nothing," said Harry quickly.

"Well, I think you're right. Legend says there is a beast in the Chamber that can kill. It must be some sort of snake."

"Right," Harry agreed. "But why would Hagrid tell you to follow the spiders if we are looking for a snake?"

"I don't know!" said Hermione. "This is so frustrating!"

Harry thought of that trip he'd taken into the girl's bathroom. He thought of the voices he'd heard in the walls. He wondered, if he'd understood a snake in the zoo before, maybe he could understand...

Harry finally did it. He tripped over his own two feet and lost all of his books. They fell to the floor. He cursed and rushed to gather them. Hermione knelt down to help, much to Harry's surprise. She reached out to grab Riddle's Diary. The moment she placed her hand upon it, however, she jumped back and gasped.

"What is it?" Harry demanded.

"Spider," said Hermione, grabbing the book and handing it to Harry. "It startled me, that's all."

She pointed at the tiny insect crawling on the stone floor of the corridor. Another spider followed in its wake, and another, and another... Harry's eyebrows narrowed as he watched the line of

spiders all crawling toward the wall to the left of them, up it, and out a little crack beneath the pane of a window.

"What on earth..." said Hermione. "Do you think this is what Hagrid meant...?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "But we ought to get to class."

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HORROR EPITOMIZED: TWO ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN PRISON!

By Staff Writer, Rita Skeeter

Breaking news! The Ministry of Magic has confirmed reports that two inmates escaped separately from Azkaban Prison late last night. According to official reports, convicted mass murderer Sirius Black was discovered to be missing from his cell only seven minutes after inspection. Officials say that the Dementors immediately launched a search throughout the tower, but their response was stifled by some sort of miscommunication, resulting in chaos. Once the situation was firmly under control, it was then discovered that convicted torturer and murderer Bellatrix Lestrangle was also missing from her cell.

Lestrangle and Black, both cousins, and both convicted Death Eaters were kept in the same wing of Azkaban. It has been speculated that they somehow worked to escape together, marking the first ever breakout in the history of Azkaban prison. When asked to comment, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge said the following: "Let it be known that the Ministry is doing everything in its power to locate and apprehend both Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrangle. Be advised that these two are criminals and regarded as highly dangerous. If you spot them, do not confront them. Contact the Auror Office at the Ministry of Magic immediately."

No word on how Black and Lestrangle could have possibly escaped. It has been suggested by an official source that the Ministry of Magic may close down Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the coming days. Our source tells us that the Ministry does not wish to be spread thin in the hunt for Black and Lestrangle as well as the investigation into the Chamber of Secrets. Gamekeeper Rufus Hairgrid was recently apprehended on the grounds of possibly

conspiring to open the Chamber of Secrets. He remains in Azkaban Prison.

Fudge has yet to provide a statement dealing with the Muggle world. It is well known that Sirius Black was a Muggle murderer. It is feared that he may strike again. Task forces are being deployed to all heavy metropolitan Muggle areas throughout Britain to be on the lookout for Black. The Ministry has not yet set up a policy on how to effectively search for Bellatrix Lestrange. It is not even certain whether or not the two are working together, or if one used the other's escape as a diversion to escape themselves.

Continue to be vigilant in these dark times, and continue to purchase the Daily Prophet for all your breaking headlines.

Chapter 28: The End of Hogwarts

BREAKING NEWS: HOGWARTS SCHOOL TO CLOSE

By Staff Writer, Rita Skeeter

Yesterday night, Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor and Auror Bane Belfry was found dead on the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by Potions Professor Severus Snape. The Minister of Magic immediately held a press conference and made several statements:

"The loss of Bane Belfry is a tragedy, and the fact that it happened on the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is alarming. Therefore, in light of Auror Belfry's untimely death, and also in light of the breakout from Azkaban Prison, the Ministry of Magic is ending its efforts to investigate the Chamber of Secrets. Hogwarts School is hereby closed. Students will be provided transportation from the school at the earliest possible convenience. We ask that no parents attempt to privately remove their students from the grounds of the school. A snowstorm has arisen near Hogwarts, making the navigation for the Hogwarts Express difficult. The projected date of Hogwarts' closure is December the 5th, two days from now. Once fully evacuated, Hogwarts is to be listed as a highly dangerous building and to be condemned. Meanwhile, we continue our investigation into the escape of Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange."

No word yet on how Bane Belfry met his untimely end. He was found near an out of order girls lavatory on the second floor, our sources tell us. The cause of death is unknown.

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Harry tossed the copy of the Daily Prophet into the fireplace. It caught flame immediately. He buried his head in his hands, unable to believe the tragedy of the situation. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, his only true home, was about to close its doors forever. He desperately wished he could do something to stop this from happening.

If only he could find the Chamber of Secrets. If only he knew the identity of the Heir of Slytherin. He could turn them in to Dumbledore,

and this nightmare would be over. Hogwarts would remain open, and he wouldn't have to return to the Dursleys until summer. He'd have more time to figure out a way of avoiding that as well. Harry thought it dreadful that Hogwarts was closing just in time for Christmas. The last place he wanted to spend his holiday at was in his room at the Dursley's.

Draco and Blaise sat solemnly across from Harry on separate chairs before a lit fireplace in the Slytherin Common Room. They'd been there all day. It was now nighttime, Harry thought, though he couldn't be sure.

That morning, Snape had entered the Common Room and told them all that they were to remain here indefinitely, until Hogwarts was closed or until the staff determined whether or not an evacuation to Hogsmeade was feasible or necessary. When Harry had asked Snape why Hogwarts was to be closed, Snape had merely handed him a copy of the Daily Prophet and then left. Harry had spent almost all day reading and rereading Rita Skeeter's article. He desperately wanted to believe it was all a lie.

All the information he'd gleaned from Hermione was useless to him now. They'd determined yesterday that the beast in the Chamber must be a snake, and Hermione had said she would do a bit of research in the library.

Harry had spent the rest of the night thinking about the voice he'd heard near the closed girl's lavatory. He'd even ventured to the library under his Invisibility Cloak to search for information on Parseltongue, the snake language. He'd found a book that gave a passive description on the subject, nothing too detailed. It didn't tell him whether the speaker or listener of Parseltongue had to be taught the language, or if it was a given trait, like the gift of magic itself. Harry assumed it was the latter since the book made it clear that the ability to speak and understand Parseltongue was extremely rare. He didn't think it could be taught.

He wondered if he really had used it without being aware of it. If he had, if he truly could understand snakes, then maybe the voice in the walls near the lavatory was that of the snake inside the Chamber of Secrets. Perhaps, back when he'd heard it, it had been intending to kill. If that was true, it had succeeded last night with Bane Belfry.

Harry sat there, wondering what he could do. He supposed he could try telling Snape about what he thought, but Harry wasn't even sure he believed his own theory about the snake in the lavatory. It sounded like a half-exaggerated, half-fabricated explanation given by someone desperate. He thought that he might be able to sneak out that night under the Invisibility Cloak again, and further investigate the bathroom for any sign of the snake or the Chamber of Secrets. Harry supposed that that was his best bet. Nothing was likely to come of it, but he had no other options.

First, however, Harry decided he would ask Tom Riddle what he knew about the Chamber of Secrets through the diary. Maybe the diary had something useful to provide him with.

Harry stood. Draco and Blaise looked at him.

"Where are you going, Potter?" Draco demanded.

"Bed," said Harry dully.

"Bed?" echoed Blaise. "It's only half past eight."

Harry was too intently focused upon his mission and his depression to even respond. Nevertheless, he decided that he must, otherwise he was liable to get caught up in more conversation by their demands. So, he simply said "yes", and then walked off to the dormitory.

It was empty and dark inside when he reached it. Everyone else was still in the Common Room. For Harry's purpose, this was good. He sat down at the desk by his bedside, and used a charm he'd learned to light the oil lamp there.

He placed Riddle's Diary in front of him, dug out his quill and ink, and opened the leather cover of the diary to the first blank page.

This, thought Harry, is my last chance.

Speaking to Tom Riddle's memory through the magic diary, as insane as it sounded, was Harry's only chance of discovering anything new that might lead him to the Chamber of Secrets. He had only tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow night to find the Chamber of Secrets, and do whatever he could to kill the evil lurking there.

Hogwarts would not be shut down. Harry could not let that happen. He would have to dig into the past to discover what he could about the Chamber.

Harry dipped his quill in the ink, and began to write:

"Hello, Tom Riddle."

A slight pause, and then his words vanished, as though they had sunken through the pages. After a moment, they were replaced by the familiar, beautiful script of Tom Riddle's hand:

"Hello, Harry Potter. When we last spoke, I believe it was about the Chamber of Secrets. I assume you still wish to know more about the subject."

Harry rushed to scribble out a hasty response. He suddenly became acutely aware of his own desperation as he scratched out a line of nearly unreadable words.

"Yes!" Harry wrote. "Hogwarts is closing. I need to find the Chamber of Secrets now and stop whatever is inside. Do you know anything about the monster? Or about where the Chamber actually is?"

Harry's horrible example of penmanship vanished after a moment, and he sat there at the desk waiting for Tom Riddle's response. He tapped his fingers upon the wooden surface of the desk impatiently. A minute went by. Harry wondered what was going on. Riddle hadn't taken this much time to respond before. Perhaps the diary was now defect. Maybe the magic had worn away. Riddle had said it was a project of his as a student. He probably wasn't entirely sure of what he was doing. Maybe the spell he'd used wasn't powerful enough. That was all Harry needed. Riddle was very much his last chance. Harry had many of the pieces, and he was desperately hoping that Riddle could put them together for him because Harry did not know how to do it. All he knew was that he was close to solving the enigma of the Chamber of Secrets.

He knew that the beast inside was some kind of snake. He'd heard it in the walls. He knew that the Heir of Slytherin had opened the Chamber and released the beast. He did not know who the Heir was, or who had written the messages upon the wall, but he was sure that, if he found the Chamber, he would find the Heir.

Tom Riddle's response finally materialized upon the page, and Harry nearly cried out in relief.

"I know many things about the Chamber of Secrets, Harry Potter. I can tell you two things for certain. One, the beast inside the Chamber of Secrets is an ancient monster called a Basilisk. It is one of the most dangerous creatures in the world. The venom of the Basilisk is lethal. If bitten, a person has about a minute or two to live. Worse, though, is that the Basilisk rarely has occasion to use its fangs, because looking directly into the eyes of the Basilisk also kills."

After Harry had finished reading the text, it vanished again. He rushed to write a reply.

"So, the Basilisk is like a giant snake, right? And it kills? That doesn't explain the petrifications."

"No, I suppose not. That would be an anomaly. Were the victims found near items that could provide a reflection?"

Harry thought it over a moment. He remembered very clearly that Filch and his cat were found near a suit of armor in the Entrance Hall. Filch had been polishing it. Despite the fact that the man was a squib, and a rotten old fool, he'd managed to polish the armor enough so that Harry could see his own reflection in it.

The Basilisk would have probably approached Filch and Mrs. Norris from behind, and they would've seen the reflection of its eyes in the suit of armor.

Ron Weasley had been found in the library, likely performing research for Hermione. Harry wasn't sure what the circumstances surrounding Weasley's petrification were, so, like Weasley himself, it was all rather useless.

Lockhart had been petrified after Weasley. And he was the final victim before Belfry's murder. McGonagall had found him in a lavatory, smiling like a narcissist into a... mirror.

"Yes," Harry wrote back to Tom Riddle. "One was near a suit of armor, one was staring into a mirror, and I'm not sure about the last one."

"As I suspected," Riddle replied. "My theory is that the power of the eyes of the Basilisk is diluted when seen through another medium. Instead of killing, it petrifies."

Harry nodded to himself. That made sense, but it did not help him where the Chamber of Secrets was concerned. All he knew now was that he had to kill a Basilisk. He was not certain of how he'd go about accomplishing such a feat, but he'd worry about that after he knew where to find the bloody Chamber.

"I agree," Harry wrote, not knowing what else to say in response to Riddle's theory. "What is the second thing you know for certain?"

"The second thing I know is that the Muggle born girl that was killed by the Basilisk when I went to school was found dead in a lavatory."

Harry paused a moment.

"What lavatory?"

"The girl's lavatory on the second floor. The dead girl's name was Myrtle."

Harry blinked.

-Auror Bane Belfry was found dead on the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.—

Harry was beginning to feel incredibly stupid. It was all beginning to take shape.

-He was found near an out of order girl's lavatory on the second floor.—

Of course.

-Harry froze when he stepped in a puddle of water.—

- "KILL!" screamed the voice. He jumped and looked to his left to see the door to what was generally regarded as a very undesirable lavatory to use. Harry didn't exactly remember why. He thought he might've been told before by someone, but that someone would've been a girl because this was a girl's lavatory. The voice was coming from the other side of the door. He was sure of it. Harry drew his wand, gripped the handle, and very slowly opened the door.—

Harry felt sick. He'd been in that lavatory before. The lavatory where the Muggle girl was killed; where Lockhart was also found petrified, and near where Belfry was found dead.

- There was, indeed, a rolled-up book shoved in the draining hole. The toilet gurgled loudly, causing Harry to jump, and the water level inside suddenly receded. The book appeared to have been blocking its drainage. Harry then noticed that there was a ceramic pot filled with dirt weighing down the flushing handle. It was leaning against the side of the stall for support. Harry took it off and spilled the contents on the floor. There was nothing inside, just soil.—

That lavatory was where he'd found Tom Riddle's diary.

Out of all unlikely places, the lavatory was the key. That had to be where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was, or at least an exit point for the Basilisk.

It suddenly all came together. Harry was a Parselmouth. He'd heard the voice of the Basilisk in the walls because the Basilisk was using the plumbing to move around Hogwarts.

Harry understood what he had to do.

He would have to sneak out of the dormitory tonight, and find a way to enter the Chamber of Secrets. He would have to end it himself, with the help of no one else. Harry felt a heady rush of relief. The pieces had all come together. He knew how to find the problem. Now he would just have to concentrate on how to solve it. And, there was one more variable...

"Who is the Heir of Slytherin?" Harry asked Tom Riddle.

He waited anxiously for a reply, but nothing came. After a time, Harry began to wonder if a reply would ever come. He wrote the same sentence again. This time, the ink did not fade.

Harry felt as though he'd been on the phone, and the party on the other end had hung up on him. He had no way of reaching Riddle again. Harry closed the leather cover of the book. It did not matter. Riddle had abandoned him. He would soon discover the identity of the Heir of Slytherin, he was sure of it. Besides, the Basilisk was the more pressing matter. It sounded much more dangerous than the Heir.

Harry stuffed the book in his trunk. It felt suddenly cold as it left his hands. He was vaguely glad to be rid of it.

Harry pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and then shoved it in the pocket of his robes. He was not a patient person, but he understood that he would have to wait until everyone in the Common Room had gone to sleep before he had any hope of sneaking out. He could try, of course, but he feared that the door to the Common Room opening and closing on its own accord would probably incite a panic, even among the Slytherins that were so sure they were safe from the lethal power of the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry slammed his trunk shut and left the dormitory. He headed back up the winding staircase to the Common Room.

He reached it with a new awareness. He no longer felt depressed, or weighed down by hopelessness. There was a new vigor in his step as he walked across the cold, stone floor toward where Draco and Blaise still sat. The situation was no longer hopeless. Harry had the information he needed to fix this problem forever. Now, all he had to do, was accomplish it.

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Harry waited in his bed, eyes wide open as he listened for the telltale signs of slumber within his dormitory. Unfortunately, the boys that shared the dormitory with him seemed to be finding it just as difficult to sleep as Harry did, and not for entirely different reasons. He was aware that all of them were awake, although nobody said anything.

Harry was not sure how long they'd all been lying there, wide awake and fully aware of one another's consciousness.

There was a discernible tension in the air. It was a feeling, for Harry, like impossibly painful anticipation. He wanted nothing more than for them all to go to sleep so he could slip out of the dormitory unnoticed and make his way to the girl's lavatory on the second floor.

The door to the dormitory suddenly burst open. A robed silhouette with long, unkempt hair stood in the threshold. Harry wildly thought of the photo of Bellatrix Lestrange he had seen in the pages of the Daily Prophet.

Crabbe screamed in terror.

The figure drew a wand, aimed it into their room, and said: "Lumos!"

Harry blinked at the sudden, unwelcome invasion of light.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" he heard Draco demand.

"Be silent, Malfoy, or I will have you restrained," snapped Professor McGonagall. "Get up, all of you. Make your way to the Common Room. NOW!"

They wasted no time complying with Professor McGonagall's orders. Harry had never heard her speak in such a manner before. Her tone of unbridled horror mixed with a frightening severity was enough to send a jolt of adrenaline through Harry's heart. That, coupled with the fact that McGonagall's appearance in the Slytherin boy's dormitory was highly irregular—in fact, unprecedented—scared Harry very much.

McGonagall left the threshold of the doorway and moved to wake up other students. Harry and all the occupants of his dormitory rushed up the stairs to the Common Room. They found it full of most of the Slytherin House. Professor Snape stood before a lit fire, counting everyone sitting on the floor before him. He glanced up to see Harry and the others enter the room, and quickly added them to his tally.

Harry took a seat near the back of the group of students and waited while others entered the Common Room and Snape counted them as well.

After a short time, McGonagall arrived from the stairwell of the boy's dormitory.

"That's the last of them," she said to Snape.

"Good," Snape replied. "They are all accounted for."

"Thank Merlin!" Professor McGonagall practically screamed.

Several people shot strange looks at McGonagall. It was highly unusual to be thankful for all Slytherins being accounted for. It was speculated, but never really proven by any solid evidence, that McGonagall held personal vendettas for many of the students sitting on the floor before her.

"Professor," said Draco suddenly, referring to Snape. "What the bloody hell is going on?"

McGonagall and Snape exchanged looks.

"We are taking a tally to make sure you are all accounted for," said McGonagall. All heads turned her way. Harry noticed she was wearing a nightgown, and that her hair was not tied up in its usual fashion. She was allowing it to hang down, and it looked slightly disheveled and unkempt.

"Why?" demanded another student.

"Because..." McGonagall trailed off, and then suddenly buried her face in her hands and shook her head rapidly. Harry was stunned. He had never seen Professor McGonagall behave in such a way before. Whatever it was that Snape and McGonagall had come here for, it was bad. This fact was not lost upon the Slytherin House.

"A young boy has been abducted," said Snape quietly. Everyone directed their attention to him. "As far as we know, he was stolen right out of his dormitory tonight. Nobody saw anything. A message was, however, discovered."

"What kind of message?" Harry found himself asking before he could stop himself.

"A threat," Snape replied vaguely. "A threat that gives us sound reason to believe that he was taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself."

"Oh, Severus!" cired McGonagall. "We need to stop wasting time!"

"I understand, Minerva," Snape replied tersely. His tone was the first piece of evidence that this situation was also having any kind of effect on him. "First, we need to ensure that all of the other students are accounted for."

"I remember very clearly what Albus instructed us to do, thank you," McGonagall snapped.

"Then I suggest you go and find Flitwick, Sprout, Sinistra, Trelawney, or the Headmaster and assess the situation. I will remain here with my House until we are certain."

McGonagall nodded. "Very well," she replied, and then she left without a further word, her wand still held tightly in her hand.

When she was gone, Draco asked another question.

"What student was taken?"

Snape looked pointedly at the entire group. "Neville Longbottom."

A collective, horrified gasp issued throughout the Slytherin Common Room.

"But he's a Pure Blood!" someone protested loudly. "I don't understand!"

"Silence!" Snape ordered. "Yes, Longbottom is a Pure Blood, so obviously whoever is behind these events no longer feels any need to follow the ancient decree of Salazar Slytherin which means that everyone is in grave danger. We are evacuating to Hogsmeade tonight. The students in all the other Houses are being accounted for. Professors Sprout, Sinistra, and Trelawney had agreed to escort you all to Hogsmeade. An owl has been sent to the Ministry. Aurors are on their way. The Headmaster, myself, and Professors McGonagall and Flitwick will be investigating Longbottoms abduction, along with the help of the Aurors."

No one spoke. The silence in the room was oppressive.

Harry felt sick. A thousand things were happening at once.

Neville had been taken. It was over. They were leaving Hogwarts tonight. He would be back at the Dursleys within a day or two. He knew about the Chamber. He knew where approximately where to find the entrance. None of it mattered. He'd failed. Neville was probably dead. Hogwarts would be demolished. His home would be gone.

He looked up at Snape. He thought that maybe he had one last chance...

So... On a purely technical note... What did you guys think of my method for flashbacks? Example: -insert flashback.-

Good idea? I recently came up with it the other day when I was writing a chapter for a piece of... um... SAW fanfiction. Yeeeeeah. If any of you are SAW fans, you should definitely check it out whenever I get it posted! Anyway, give me your opinions on the method. It would be much appreciated. It probably works better in the SAW fic since it's just dialog that I flashback to, but the idea is still the same. Yeah.

By the way, Teufel, you disabled your private messaging or something so I couldn't reply to your reply to my review reply. I'd like to say, intriguing idea. I might go for it, but in a different way... I don't want to make anything AU prior to Harry putting on the Sorting Hat. This fic is meant to be a "what if" kind of fic, you know? Oh, and don't ask me how Harry being in Slytherin makes Bellatrix break out of Azkaban! Important plot point, that! Believe me, I have very good plans for the POA era storyline!

Chapter 29: The Chamber of Secrets

Harry looked up at Snape, fully understanding what he was about to say was very unlikely to be believed. He had no other choice, though. This would be his last act of desperation before everything was lost.

And then McGonagall stormed into the Slytherin Common Room again, wand still clutched in her hand. Her hair was tied back now, and she looked even more on edge if such a thing was even possible. She truly was the last person Harry wanted to see. He felt his stomach sink like a boulder in an ocean. This was the end of it.

"They're ready," said McGonagall. "We are evacuating. They've rushed the Express and several of the pubs and inns have opened tonight to provide shelter for the students."

"Very well," said Snape gravely. "Everyone, follow Professor McGonagall and myself. Do not deviate an inch or abandon the group in any way. Your lives are at risk, make no mistake."

The silence was oppressive. Harry did not dare break it, not now. He wouldn't be believed, especially not with McGonagall here. His claim would immediately be dismissed as foolish time-wasting. He would be lectured on the seriousness of the situation; reminded that Bane Belfry was dead and that Neville Longbottom had been taken. This was not the time. Harry felt inside his pocket for the Invisibility Cloak.

Things suddenly seemed easier.

The Slytherin House all gathered together. Most of them wanted to be in the center of the large mob. No one seemed to like the idea of remaining on the fringes, except Harry who quietly lost Draco and Blaise in the chaos and took a spot at the edge of the erratic mass.

Funny, thought Harry passively. They had all been so sure of themselves before. The Chamber of Secrets would never effect them, except that it might result in the closure of Hogwarts. Now that a Pure Blood had been taken into the Chamber, even a Pure Blood as wholly... ignoble and... impure as Neville Longbottom, they were all afraid. Harry scoffed at the cowardice of the Slytherin House.

There were traits he appreciated that the Slytherins possessed. They were intelligent, cunning, and subtle, but, when the unknown came into play, they were often a bunch of bloody cowards. The Gryffindors had them beat on that front. If only they weren't so stupid.

McGonagall and Snape did not even attempt to corral the students and make order out of chaos. They seemed too preoccupied with just getting everyone out.

"Stay together," Snape warned them one last time.

"Follow me," said Professor McGonagall gravely.

Like a herd of cattle, the Slytherin House followed the head of the Gryffindor House of their Common Room for, perhaps, the last time. Unless Harry could do something about it, he was sure he would never see the Common Room again.

Snape remained on the flanks of the mob. Harry fell to the back.

They moved at a dangerously fast pace. It was very easy for Harry to stop and throw the Invisibility cloak over himself. No one noticed. They were all too busy making a break for the Entrance Hall.

Harry halted, and turned back. There was one thing he felt he should bring with him to the Chamber of Secrets. One thing that still might be of use to him.

He sprinted back to the Slytherin Common room and down to his dormitory. He grabbed Tom Riddle's Diary, tucked it into the inner pockets of his robes, and then sprinted back out, heading for the Entrance Hall.

Upon arriving in the Entrance Hall, Harry saw that the Slytherin House had met Professor Flitwick who stood near the great, oak doors, both of which were fully open. Harry and the Slytherin House were assaulted by a rush of freezing December air. A collective shiver ran through the group, and Harry's heart skipped a beat as his Invisibility Cloak was almost torn off of him by the wind.

Snape demanded that the Slytherins to halt and be still before leaving Hogwarts. McGonagall left them without a word and bolted off toward the Grand Staircase. Harry followed quickly behind her as

Snape ordered them all to listen as he called their names to ensure they were all there.

By the time he reached Harry's name on the list, Harry would already be in Myrtles bathroom.

Harry followed McGonagall as silently as he could almost all the way to the Grand Staircase. He lost her along the way as she was practically running and he didn't attempt to keep up.

He reached the Staircase sometime after her. She was nowhere to be found.

Very suddenly, a deep rumble began to resonate from somewhere far below, in the very depths of the rock upon which Hogwarts stood. Harry wildly thought of an earthquake, although he'd never experienced one before. He heard a chorus of screams issue from further up the Grand Staircase. More students making their way to the Entrance Hall, he thought.

And then the rumble died instantaneously, and it was as though nothing at all had happened.

Harry wondered if this has something to do with the Chamber of Secrets. In his gut, he knew that it did. It seemed alarmingly obvious.

He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the second floor corridor. It was deserted. Harry strode quickly down it, toward the girl's lavatory. He reached the door and paused. A long wail issued from the other side, but it didn't sound like Neville, or anyone Harry had ever met, for that matter. It echoed and reverberated, much like Harry thought the wail of a ghost should.

He pushed the door open and entered the bathroom. One of the toilets was flooding. He could hear the water splashing on the floor.

When the door closed, the disembodied voice of a girl shouted after it.

"Who's there?" it cried. "Who's there?"

Harry turned his head toward the source of the voice, and the ghost of a girl with dark hair and thick glasses suddenly floated through the

closed door of the last stall. Harry pulled off his Invisibility Cloak. The ghost, who he assumed must be the ghost of the Muggle born girl that had died in the lavatory, gasped at him.

"Goodness!" she cried. "You're Harry Potter!"

Of all things he'd been expecting her to say, that was not one.

"Er... yes," Harry replied. "And you must be Myrtle?"

The ghost suddenly let out what sounded like a gleeful cackle. It was actually rather frightening.

"Yes, Harry Potter, yes! Do you know you're the first person to come in here and call me by my real name since... Well, you're probably the first person ever!"

"That's nice," said Harry awkwardly and a bit impatiently. "What do other people call you?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'm not going to tell you!"

She crossed her arms childishly. Harry did not care. He really had no desire to engage in conversation with a dead girl. He had a few specific questions, that was all. He was focused, and he was on a mission. Snape had probably realized he was gone. The staff was likely scouring the castle for any sign of him. They would methodically sweep all of the floors until they found him, or, as they might also be expecting, a message saying that he had been taken to the Chamber of Secrets. Harry suddenly felt very short on time. He was only on the second floor. Flitwick and Snape were on the ground floor. One of them would search the first floor and the other would search the second. This bathroom would be one of the first places they looked since it was very close to the Grand Staircase.

He could not be discovered.

"Listen, Myrtle," Harry began. He was interrupted by a burst of her insane, gleeful laughter.

"Myrtle!" he called over her incessant cackling. "I have a question, it's very important!"

"Anything for you, Harry," said Myrtle coquettishly.

Harry paused a moment, not at all liking the tone of the dead girl's voice. "I was wondering how you died," he said somewhat awkwardly and hurriedly demanded.

"Oh..." said Myrtle, trailing off. "It was terrible."

"What happened?"

"I don't remember."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling an intense desire to strangle Myrtle and kill her again. This was his last chance.

"You don't remember?" Harry said through gritted teeth.

"Not really," said Myrtle dejectedly. "Although, I do recall a pair of great, yellow eyes... Over there."

She pointed to a nearby sink.

Without a word, Harry rushed to examine it.

He started on the bottom, examining the pipes and the lower part of the sink. There was nothing remarkable about it whatsoever, except that the pipes were slightly rusty. Cursing, Harry moved to examine the taps, and there he found something promising. A tiny image of a coiled snake had been worked into the metal of the one of the taps. This was it. Harry knew it. This was the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, in the most unlikely of places. A girls lavatory on the second floor. Salazar Slytherin could not have picked a more obscure location, except, perhaps, a broom closet.

Now, the only problem was opening it.

Harry didn't even bother trying the taps. If that was the way it was done, then someone would have accidentally opened it a very long time ago.

-Snakes are the symbol of the Slytherin House, and Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth.-

Harry stared at the carving of the snake on the tap... How...?

-A Parselmouth. Wizards that can talk to snakes.-

Harry was a Parselmouth...

That had to be it, thought Harry. Parseltongue. The Chamber had to be opened by someone who could speak the snake language.

Harry could. He'd done it once before, just by looking at a snake, without being aware of it.

-Thanksss.-

-Er... no problem.-

He had to do it again right now. It wasn't that hard to imagine that the tiny carving on the tap was real. If he stared at it long enough and hard enough, it seemed to move and waver and coil like an actual snake. Dimly, he was aware of Myrtle's annoying, inquiring voice, demanding his attention. He ignored her.

"Open," said Harry. He was shocked to hear a sinister, rather guttural hiss issue from his throat.

He stood back as the sink began to shake. Myrtle gaped at him.

"You're a Parselmouth!" she screeched.

"Evidently," Harry replied rather absentmindedly, he was too busy watching the show that the sink was putting on. Myrtle screamed and launched herself back into the closed stall. A massive, booming splash issued from the toilet within the stall after she disappeared. Harry forgot her almost as soon as she was gone.

The tap on the sink began to glow a brilliant white. It spun impossibly fast, and a moment after it had begun to spin, the sink itself began to move. It suddenly dropped out of sight, revealing the

large entrance to a pipe big enough for a grown man to enter. It seemed to go straight down.

Harry aimed his wand into the dark abyss of the pipe and said: "Lumos!"

The light didn't help much. It hardly seemed to penetrate the blackness.

"Potter!" Harry heard a voice call frantically from outside the lavatory.

Harry did not hesitate. He had no choice. If they discovered him, they would stop him, and he had to finish this.

He jumped into the pipe and fell straight down, his stomach seemed to lift into his throat. He screamed. His voice echoed all around him.

His rear end hit a slimy, hard, angled surface. It hurt. And then he was sliding and twisting in every direction.

As he was tossed about in the madness of the twisting pipe, he noticed other pipes branching out all around him, though none were as big as the one he was sliding down. He felt as though he was falling deep below the school, deeper than even the dungeons.

The pipe then began to level out and he was unceremoniously tossed out onto the cold, wet, stone floor of a dark tunnel tall enough to stand in.

Harry stood, trying to wipe off the slime that now coated his clothes with his hands. He quickly realized his effort was futile. He crouched down to grab his wand which was still lit by the Lumos Charm. He'd dropped it sometime upon landing. It was his only source of light.

He appeared to be standing in a natural cave, deep below the foundation of Hogwarts. Behind him, the pipe he'd slid down extended from the rocky wall several feet. A tiny trickle of water dripped from it. In front of him, the cave stretched onward.

Harry did not hesitate. He moved forward.

For a short time, all was silent. Even his footsteps. The quiet was eerie, like the silence of a graveyard.

A loud crunch suddenly broke the silence and echoed throughout the cave. Harry looked down to see that he had stepped on and cracked the tiny bones of some long dead animal. The floor of the cave here was covered with them. They were strewn everywhere. Many of them had been broken and shattered into a thousand tiny pieces of shrapnel.

For the first time, Harry felt afraid.

He pushed on, walking over the animal bones, holding his wand out in front of him. Each of his footsteps crunched loudly. Each sound increased his heightened sense of awareness and fear. He suddenly felt very exposed. The Basilisk could hear him, and strike at any moment from any shadow.

The light of Harry's wand very suddenly revealed a large clump of scaly flesh. Harry froze, not daring to move in case the thing was alive. After a time, he determined that it must not be, and he approached it.

He realized with growing alarm that it was a massive snake skin, bigger than anything Harry had imagined. He suddenly felt very naïve for rushing headlong into the Chamber of Secrets to fight a Basilisk without any type of plan. The best he'd come up with was that Tom Riddle's diary, which had become impotent for some unknown reason only a short time before, would be of use to him. And that had only been an impulse.

Harry pressed on, giving the snake skin as wide a berth as possible.

Very soon, the animal bones disappeared. The floor beyond was only covered in dirt and rock.

The tunnel suddenly began to wind, turning everywhere unexpectedly. Harry threw caution aside as he navigated through the mess of twists and turns, wanting nothing more than for the tunnel to end, but afraid of what he would find when it did.

What he found was not what he expected.

Harry came upon a solid wall. Two intertwined serpents were carved there. Glowing emeralds were inset into the carefully gouged cavities that were their eye sockets. They glinted in the light of Harry's wand.

Harry stopped, and did what seemed right to him. This time it was easier.

"Open," he commanded in Parseltongue.

The serpents parted and the two halves of the wall slid swiftly and silently out of sight. Harry walked through the threshold and found himself standing at the top of a stairway that led into a long, wide, dimly lit tunnel.

The place glowed with an eerie, flickery, greenish light. Tall pillars, covered in innumerable, intertwining carvings serpents rose up on either side to support a ceiling that Harry could not see.

Harry descended the stairs, and as he came to the floor, the entire Chamber was revealed to him. Besides the pillars and the sourceless, green light, it was rather plain. At the end, however, stood a colossal statue of a primordially evil looking wizard that Harry assumed must be Salazar Slytherin. A scraggly, disgusting, stone beard, coated with grime extended the length of the statue's body, all the way down to his stone feet, peeking out beneath his stone robes.

In front of the statue stood three figures.

One was lying on the ground, sprawled like a lifeless corpse. Another wore a pair of dark, tight-fitting robes. Its hair was curly, wild, an unkempt. The last figure was slightly shorter than the second. It appeared to be dressed in Hogwarts robes, and its hair, in contrast to the second figure's, was impeccably well groomed.

Harry heard them whispering.

"So ugly," said the voice of a female. "Just like his blood traitor father. Good for nothing, filth! At least I'm here to see him put to good use, unlike his parents... Oh, my lord. You are so... beautiful."

"Now, now," said the smooth, cold voice of a man, "be silent and wait here with me until the process is complete. You did well, stealing him from his bed."

"Yes, my lord, yes! Anything you desire! It was my pleasure to take the child for you! No one saw a thing!" squealed the woman with an unnatural delightfulness.

"You always were one of my favorites, my dear. Ah, but look. We have a visitor. Ah! And look what he's brought with him. One of my most prized possessions. I told you about it before you brought me the boy, remember?"

The figure in tight-fitting robes with long, unkempt hair, and the slightly shorter figure in Hogwarts robes both turned to face Harry.

"Oh, yes, my lord! I remember! Accio!"

Harry gasped as Riddle's diary was torn from the pocket of his robes by an invisible force. It flew toward the three figures, and landed at the foot of the shorter one wearing Hogwarts robes.

Harry rushed down the steps after the diary, and stopped short when he was able to discern the identity of one of the people standing before him.

The taller one was Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry recognized her from her picture in the Daily Prophet. Now, however, her jet black hair sported a streak of gray, and her fine, noble beauty seemed a bit rough around the edges, as though the years in Azkaban had robbed her of her impeccable looks, but not quite. Her eyes were insane. She had stolen Riddle's diary from Harry with magic.

It now sat on the floor next to the slightly shorter figure. This one, Harry did not recognize. He was a young man Harry had never seen before. He was incredibly handsome. His face was almost too perfect. Upon it sat a large, immaculate smile.

"Hello, Harry Potter," he said.

"HARRY POTTER!" roared Bellatrix Lestrange so loudly that her voice cracked. "You filthy little Half Blood!"

"Silence, Bellatrix," said the young man. "Won't you come and join us, Harry?"

"Who are you?" was all Harry could think to say in reply.

"You would probably recognize me best as Tom Riddle."

Bellatrix giggled.

Harry started toward them, entirely confused. Why, he wondered, would Tom Riddle and Bellatrix Lestrange be together in the Chamber of Secrets? How did they even manage to enter it? Tom Riddle was dead and Bellatrix Lestrange was a fugitive!

Harry finally realized that the third figure, the one on the floor, was Neville Longbottom. His face was deathly pale and coated in a thin film of sweat. The toad he always carried around lay ripped in pieces on the ground next to him. The sight made Harry's stomach churn.

"Is he..." Harry trailed off.

"Dead?" finished Tom. "No, not yet."

Harry stopped, standing several feet away from Tom Riddle and Bellatrix Lestrange.

Riddle was still smiling his handsome, inviting smile. Bellatrix was grinning wolfishly.

"What's happened to him? I have to get him out, Tom! The Ministry won't tolerate another death. Why is she with you?"

Riddle's smile widened. "You see, Harry, that old diary of mine did more than preserve my memory."

Riddle kicked a tiny book lying next to his foot.

"How did you take that from me? Why?"

"I took it with magic," snapped Bellatrix. She stopped to indulge in a furious fit of giggles, as though her tiny joke was somehow hysterically funny.

"Yes," said Riddle. "Magic. Bellatrix used a simple summoning charm to acquire it from your person. As for why... I'd explain the finer details, but you wouldn't understand. Why Bellatrix is even here is an entirely more complex matter, again, it is above your level of understanding. Let's just say that I was able to, through many hours of concentration, undo several of the wards protecting Hogwarts so that Bellatrix here could enter the Gryffindor dormitories, unnoticed by anyone, and steal Neville Longbottom.

"Now, as for my being dead... You see, Harry, this diary acted as a vessel and preserved a sliver of me, so that one day I could return. I just need the life force of another to sustain myself. Poor Neville here is serving that purpose. With the diary now in my hands, I can finish the process. You see, Harry, one of my trusted associates got cold feet. I had entrusted my diary to him. The pressure from the Ministry evidently got to him, as he slipped the diary into the cauldron of a little redheaded girl at a bookstore in Diagon Alley. Her name was Ginny Weasley. She began to write in the diary, oftentimes in the library, confiding in me, her pen pal.

"It was very easy to influence her. Then, however, she began to grow wary. She couldn't remember things; periods of time... Time when I was possessing her. She discarded the diary, and to my intense surprise and pleasure, it was picked up by a far weaker, far more foolish little boy named Neville Longbottom. It was very, very easy to gain the trust of young Mr. Longbottom. I played on his love of Herbology. I told him secrets that even Professor Sprout doesn't know. He trusted me more than Ginny Weasley had. He did not associate the blackouts he experienced with the diary. He confided in me, telling me how afraid he was. He thought he was beginning to lose his mind. He thought that, perhaps, the messages appearing on the walls of Hogwarts were written in his hand. They were, but they were guided by mine.

"Eventually, he grew smarter, and he too disposed of my diary. And then, who should happen to find it but you? The very person I was so anxious to meet."

"Why would you want to meet me?" Harry demanded.

Riddle chuckled. "Give me your wand, Bellatrix."

To Harry's surprise, Bellatrix complied with Riddle's order unquestioningly. She practically jumped to hand him her wand, smiling at Harry the entire time.

Once her wand was in his hand, Riddle began to wave it throughout the air. He created lines of fire that formed into the words Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Once the words were written, he waved the wand and they all exploded away from each other, rearranging to form a new set of words.

These read: I am Lord Voldemort.

Harry's eyes narrowed as it all suddenly made sense. He berated himself for his stupidity; for not seeing it immediately. It was so glaringly obvious. Voldemort and Bellatrix laughed. He'd unconsciously dismissed Bellatrix's usage of the title 'lord' as pure insanity. It should have been the greatest indicator.

"It's so good to see you again, Harry," said Lord Voldemort. "You've grown so much since the last time we met."

"What are you doing here?" Harry demanded. "Why are you trying to shut down Hogwarts? Why are you trying to take away my only home?"

Bellatrix snickered and looked to Lord Voldemort with the toothy smile of a mischievous harlot.

"Allow me, my lord. It would be my honor."

"Very well, my dear Bella."

"You stupid, foolish, little twit," Bellatrix cried, her slew of mad insults directed at Harry. "The Dark Lord has no interest in Hogwarts. He is here to use his... his great power to steal the life force of Neville Longbottom and return to his former glory! And, of course, he's here to kill you. You disgusting little bastard child."

Harry aimed his wand at her. She laughed hysterically.

"Aww, look at little heroic Harry Potter! What are you, kid? Twelve? Do you really think you can hurt me? I've hurt more people than you can possibly imagine. See this kid on the floor by me. This poor, chubby, ugly little thing? He's a bastard child like you, or as good as. You know why, Potter? Do you?"

"I am not a bastard child. I had a father. And a mother." Harry looked to Voldemort. "You murdered them!"

Voldemort only smiled. Bellatrix giggled.

"Oh, Harry," she said admonishingly, wagging a spindly finger at him. "Those who oppose the Dark Lord must die. Your parents were foolish! Your father was a filthy blood traitor and your mother was an inferior bitch of a mudblood! Their deaths were favors to the rest of the Pure Blood lines."

"Shut up!" cried Harry. "Shut UP!"

"Or what, little Harry Potter? Or what? You gonna kill me, eh? You don't have the stomach, or the power. You stupid little bastard!"

Harry took aim with his wand and opened his mouth to scream out the most vile curse he knew, but Voldemort waved Bellatrix's wand, and Harry's own wand was wrenched from his grasp. It flew into Voldemort's opened hand. Voldemort then handed Bellatrix her wand.

"You wont be needing your wand, Harry," said Voldemort. "I'm going to kill you. No need to worry. You'll be with your parents very soon, and you'll no longer have to deal with the tragedies of this world."

Bellatrix laughed insanely. "But it won't be painless! I can promise you that, you dirty Half Blood! Would you like to know why this Longbottom child is a bastard? I didn't tell you yet, did I? It's because he doesn't have a daddy anymore, or a mummy. Know why, Potter? Because they've gone mad! The both of them!" She paused, threw her head back, and laughed a laugh so malicious that it caused the hair on the back of Harry's neck to stand on end. "They're probably in the mental ward at Saint Mungos, living out their lives drinking their food through straws and jumping at every little noise they hear! Know why, Potter? Because I did it to them! I tortured them out of their minds. I spent days and days and days just

dreaming up new ways to hurt them! You can't even imagine some of the things I did! Why, if I told them to you, you'd probably die of horror right there, where you're standing! Can't have that, though. Can't have that! The Dark Lord wishes to kill you himself."

"Yes, Harry," said Lord Voldemort. "Your parents resisted me. You have stopped my efforts to return to power and to gain immortality already, and you were the cause of my fall. The last time, I would have killed quickly out of convenience, for I was so eager to return to my own body. This time, however, I am nearly whole once again, and we find ourselves standing in a Chamber nobody knows how to find, except you. And you didn't tell anyone how to find it, did you, Harry? Of course not. You're naïve, my boy. You're an insult to the Slytherin House. As the Heir of Salazar Slytherin, I will ensure you are no longer alive to further disgrace his memory."

Bellatrix snorted with laughter. "But guess what, Potter? The real treat is that we have all the time in the world to waste killing you! Nobody will ever find us! Longbottom will soon be dead, and once we're finished with you, we will simply... Apparate. The Dark Lord broke the wards down here himself. The ones up top were ancient and layered, but the Dark Lord broke them quietly, and only for a short time, so as not to be noticed. They were strong down here, but they were set in place by Salazar Slytherin! Maybe you felt the effects of their removal?"

Harry remembered the earthquake.

"How?" he asked Bellatrix. "How did you even know about any of this? You were in Azkaban Prison! And where is Sirius Black? I thought both of you were murderers! I thought you both followed him!"

Bellatrix snorted again. "Rita Skeeter is a brilliant reporter, don't you think? As for my cousin, he is hardly worthy of the Dark Lord. He's hardly worthy to be called my cousin. I'll hunt him down and kill him soon enough, Potter. Don't you worry."

"Good to know," said Harry. "One less follower of Voldemort to worry about."

Bellatrix's eyes widened. "You dare speak the name of the Dark Lord?" she whispered. "YOU FILTHY HALF BLOOD BASTARD! CRUCIO!"

Harry hadn't been expecting that, but he knew what to expect after the curse was cast.

He fell to the cold, stone floor and screamed as the agony assaulted him like a barrage of knives stabbing into every inch of his flesh. The sensation was the most painful thing Harry had ever felt before. It was worse, he thought, than what Quirrel had done to him in the Chamber of the Philosopher's Stone. Bellatrix was somehow more powerful, and she seemed to be enjoying it far more than Quirrel had. The pain blocked nearly everything out for Harry, but over the smothering sensation of agony, he could hear Bellatrix laughing like a maniac and screaming with joy.

Harry couldn't take much more of the Cruciatus Curse. It was only a matter of time before the unendurable pain finally killed him. It felt as if the intense heat of the curse was cooking him from the outside, and causing a pressure to build up inside. The pressure was worst in his head. It felt as though it might drive his eyes from their sockets, or cause the bones inside his nose to explode into a thousand pieces of organic shrapnel.

Then, Bellatrix mercifully released him.

Harry coughed, and vomited on the Chamber floor. Bellatrix screeched madly and clapped her hands in rapid applause.

"Look how I've hurt him, my lord!" cried Bellatrix. "Look how he suffers!"

"I see him, my dear Bellatrix, I see him. You've done well, but please, I will handle it from here. Leave the Chamber. They will speak to the ghost and discover the entrance soon enough. They are searching for our esteemed guests. Watch for them, and stop them if they find a way to enter. I will deal with young Harry."

Bellatrix grinned obediently and then positively leered at Harry before striding confidently out of the Chamber of Secrets, wand in hand. The door closed behind her. Her gait, as opposed to her character, was impeccably straight. It had a noble quality about it,

and she held her head high. Harry was glad to see her go. Maybe she could torture people, but he was sure that, if Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore managed to find the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, they would make short work of her.

Harry berated himself for not studying defense magic more. He might have been able to put up more of a fight against Bellatrix if he had.

Harry stood up slowly, facing Lord Voldemort who was examining Harry's wand.

"Remarkably well crafted," Voldemort commented. "Holly, yes? And the core?"

"Phoenix feather," Harry replied, leaving out the other details he knew about his wand.

"Ah," said Voldemort. "That's wonderful, Harry. It's so tempting to kill you with your own wand, but I'm afraid I can't just yet. Neville is not quite dead as of now. Be patient, though. I'll soon be ready to have my revenge." Voldemort smiled a malicious half smile.

"You're the Heir of Slytherin," said Harry, trying desperately to think of a way to provoke Voldemort, as dangerous as it sounded. He needed to distract him from sucking the life force out of Neville. Harry wasn't sure if such a thing was possible, but it was the only thing he could try to do.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "I am."

"And you're the one that opened the Chamber of Secrets before?"

"Yes, I did."

"Where's the Basilisk?"

"Ah, don't worry about the Basilisk, Harry. It will only come when it's called. You won't have to deal with it. I'll be killing you myself."

Harry glanced at the diary next to Voldemort's foot. That was the source of it, thought Harry. That was what was going to finalize Voldemort's return to mortality.

Voldemort said he could not kill Harry in his present state. He could obviously still perform other types of magic, but, at this moment, a Killing Curse seemed to be beyond his range of abilities. Voldemort might think Harry naïve, but, in reality, it was Voldemort that was naïve. If it was true that he couldn't kill Harry, then it was Harry who had the advantage, even if it was small.

Harry lunged at the diary and grabbed it. It felt cold in his hands, and it was pulsating, as though it had grown a living heart in between its blank pages.

"What are you doing?" Voldemort demanded. "Give me the diary, Harry, or I'll ensure that, before you finally die, you will beg me to kill you!"

Harry smiled when he realized he'd struck a chord. "No."

An explosive crack suddenly resonated throughout the Chamber. Voldemort looked to the entrance.

"They've found a way in," he announced to no one in particular. "Regretfully, Harry, I believe that time is of the essence. I'm very sorry. I won't be able to kill you directly. If I had, you might've been thought of as a hero. Now, you will be looked at as nothing but a pathetic child, a victim of a gruesome ordeal beyond your ability to stop."

Voldemort turned to face the statue of Salazar Slytherin.

"Come to me!" he cried in Parseltongue. To Harry, though he understood the words, the hissing, spitting sound that Voldemort produced sounded like a demonic incantation meant to invoke death. "Come and kill the enemy of Salazar Slytherin!"

"Kill!" cried a familiar voice from somewhere in the Chamber. Harry had heard it before, in the walls near Myrtle's bathroom.

A rumbling tremor resonated in the floor of the Chamber. Little pebbles and brilliant plumes of dust began to drop from the ceiling, exploding into mushroom clouds of dirt when they hit the floor. Harry's heart felt as though it might explode, beating so fast, and then being beaten by the outside forces of the shaking Chamber.

The massive, grating noise of stone grinding upon stone stole Harry's attention away from Voldemort and Neville. He looked up to watch the mouth of Salazar Slytherin's statue drop open. From the impossibly dark cavity shot the powerful, giant body of a colossal serpent. The Basilisk wound its way down the statue, sliding to the ground where it halted, coiling and uncoiling as it sat in front of Harry and Voldemort.

Harry did not look up directly into its eyes. He focused on the scaly, greenish body of the snake itself. It was as thick as one of Hogwarts' turrets. Harry thought that he did not necessarily need to fear the fangs or the venom of the Basilisk. It could simply crush him without any effort.

Voldemort laughed as Harry stood frozen, unable to move or to think, focused intently on this great new obstacle before him.

"Kill the boy!" Voldemort commanded.

The Basilisk had been coiling and winding up like a rattlesnake ready to bite. In an amazing display of awesome, breathtaking, and impossibly frightening power, it sprang forward to obey the orders of Lord Voldemort.

Yep. Cheap cliff hanger. Frankly, this chapter is nearly 6000 words long, and I am NOT writing a 10,000 word chapter. I'm not. So, kindly wait till tomorrow, when I will post the next one as it's nearly finished.

EXTRA IMPORTANT PLOT HOLE NOTE: I'm not going to point out the discrepancies in this chapter. There are many. Examples: Bellatrix in the Chamber, Voldemort in the Chamber. That rumble that Bellatrix said was the wards down there breaking coupled with the time frame I already gave you last chapter, saying Neville was discovered missing the night before and Bellatrix took him, therefore she would have been in the Chamber since last night, and NOT when the rumble occurred? Maybe you all noticed that? Yep. That was intentional. I didn't screw up. It will be explained next chapter.

MAJOR HP GEEK NOTE!: Any of you see the official trailer for Deathly Hallows? It looks like it's a trailer for both parts as it

CLEARLY depicts the climax of the book. Like clearly. I had a mini flip out over it. I'm so excited!

Chapter 30: Impossibilities

Harry jumped out of the way as the entire Basilisk flung itself at him. He rolled across the cold, damp, stone floor of the Chamber as the length of the Basilisk slammed down upon it in the exact spot he'd been standing in before. The force with which the colossal serpent slammed down upon the floor was unbelievable. The entire Chamber seemed to tremor. Harry stood quickly to his feet as the Basilisk began to coil itself again.

"Don't kill me!" Harry shouted at the snake. He spoke in Parseltongue without effort. The Basilisk did not seem to hear him. It continued to coil as though what he'd just yelled was as foreign to it as the concept of Parseltongue would have been to Harry three years ago.

"Parseltongue won't work," said Lord Voldemort. "It only obeys me."

Several loud, whip-like cracks suddenly echoed throughout the Chamber. Voldemort cursed loudly in Parseltongue.

"They are here!" he cried.

They'd found the Chamber. Someone had. They would now be busy finishing Bellatrix, and after that they would come to Harry's aid. Perhaps all of them could defeat the Basilisk. Harry simply didn't know how. He cursed himself for his foolishness. He was completely unprepared. He'd never felt as stupid. He'd never felt as helpless before. He was a child. How was he to defeat this great monster? His knowledge of offensive and defensive magic had never seemed as vastly limited to him as it did now. He was like a child with all a child's knowledge facing something that could kill him with a mere twist of its body.

Harry was defenseless. He knew no spell that could kill the Basilisk. He didn't even think any magic he knew could harm the beast. Even if he was capable of performing such an impossible feat, Voldemort had stolen his wand.

The Basilisk let out a menacing hiss before it sprang.

Harry ran toward Voldemort as the Basilisk's teeth came within inches of his robes. The snap of the great snake's jaws as they shut

in an attempt to grab Harry was like a crack of thunder. Harry did not look back at the snake. He threw himself at Voldemort, reaching for his wand.

His hand wrapped around the familiar wooden surface of the wand. He expected he'd crash right into Voldemort and they'd both tumble to the ground. The Basilisk wouldn't dare try to kill him in fear of hurting its master, but instead Harry hit nothing solid. The wand came with him as he stumbled and fell to the ground. It was as though Voldemort had not been holding it at all; rather, it had been floating in mid air and Harry had seized it.

Harry realized, to his intense surprise, that he'd simply fallen right through Voldemort.

Harry picked himself up and turned to face the young image of the Dark Lord. Voldemort was smiling. It was a disturbing sight. The smile was pure malice, displayed on the face of an impossibly handsome sixteen-year-old that would otherwise be harmless, even charming. Harry scowled in retaliation to the unspoken words between him and Lord Voldemort.

Voldemort's smile proclaimed victory at the evident helplessness of Harry. But, the only time evil could ever truly be victorious was at the sanction of the victim. Harry's scowl was defiance. He would never allow Voldemort to win anything. If he died today, it would not be because he surrendered to the overwhelming power of the Dark Lord. He would fight the Basilisk until it finished him, or until it was defeated. If only he knew how to kill it.

"You have your wand, Harry," said Voldemort. "Use it."

Harry looked toward the Basilisk which was preparing for another strike. He aimed his wand at the face of the creature, not looking directly at it; avoiding the eyes. He hoped that his guess would prove true, and he hoped that this spell would work, but he knew that it wouldn't.

He opened his mouth to shout the incantation. And suddenly the cry of a great bird echoed throughout the Chamber. Harry, Voldemort, and the Basilisk turned in time to see Dumbledore's great, crimson bird glide into the Chamber. It flew like a burst of flame, lit by the power of one greater than the evil of this Chamber. It was a flame of

retribution that came to burn away the cancerous scum that infested this place. It flew above the head of the Basilisk. The great snake opened its mouth and let out a ringing hiss. It lunged at the bird, the Phoenix, and missed killing it by no more than a foot.

Dumbledore's bird flew to Harry. It was carrying something in its sharp, powerful talons. It dropped it before Harry's feet.

The Basilisk sprang again. Harry dodged out of the way and back stepped, now aware that he was cornered near the statue of Salazar Slytherin. The body of the Basilisk was now blocking any escape route he might have. Harry cursed, feeling now more helpless because he could not retrieve what the Phoenix had left him, and because he had to continually avoid the eyes of the Basilisk, lest they kill him.

Harry thought suddenly thought of the other victims of the beast, and of Lord Voldemort. Filch, his cat, Ron, Lockhart... all were found petrified. All had seen the eyes of the Basilisk through a medium that reflected them. That was why they hadn't been killed as Belfry had. The power of the Basilisk had been deluded, but it had still been viable, even though it was through a reflection of some sort. Harry wondered if the Basilisk was immune to his own power. If only he had a mirror.

"Oh, yes, my lord! I remember! Accio!"-

The diary. Harry could not see it. The colossal body of the Basilisk blocked his view. It was preparing to finally kill him, now that it had him cornered.

But the diary! Bellatrix had taken it from him, through the use of a spell. And Voldemort had taken his wand from him through the use of that same spell, Harry thought, though Voldemort had not shouted the incantation: Accio.

Harry raised his wand, well aware that he would die if he failed. He might even die if he succeeded.

He thought of a mirror, focusing intently on what it was he desired. It seemed logical. In order to call upon something with magic, it felt right to visualize in complete, unobstructed clarity. Harry closed his eyes, focusing on his dire need for a mirror in that moment,

understanding that the consecutive moments could be limited for him. One of them could very well be his last if he did not succeed.

"Accio!" Harry roared, picturing a mirror in his mind's eye.

Voldemort laughed from behind the Basilisk.

The great snake hissed. Harry could see its forked tongue shoot from the gap in its now-closed mouth as it towered above him. That mouth then opened to reveal dozens of impossibly large, and dangerously sharp teeth, all of which were coated in a thick layer of venom. The Basilisk cried out loudly in Parseltongue: "KILL!"

No mirror came to Harry. He would die. He had nothing to fight the Basilisk with!

Harry raised his wand again.

"ACCIO MIRROR!"

Harry heard Voldemort growl in rage and he looked to see a dirty, dripping, square-cut mirror zooming in from the entrance of the Chamber which was fully open despite the fact it had closed behind Bellatrix.

Harry lifted his free hand to grab the mirror as it came to him. He realized it was one of the mirrors that had been bolted to the wall before one of the sinks in Myrtle's bathroom.

Harry cried out in relief at his success. He fell to one knee, and held the mirror up in the general direction of the Basilisk's face.

Time seemed to freeze for a moment. Everything seemed to fall silent. There was no noise but the hammering of Harry's heart and the sound of his stressed breathing. All was calm. Harry thought this must be what it was like before a person died. Despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins, Harry felt still. He felt steady.

It took the cry of Lord Voldemort to make him realize that this feeling was that of confidence, and reward when such confidence turned out to be warranted.

The Basilisk let out an unearthly roar that was part hiss, part scream. It convulsed and withered, falling back, away from Harry.

Harry dropped the mirror. It shattered when it hit the ground. He looked to the Basilisk. It was floundering around on the floor of the Chamber. Voldemort was watching it, his face contorted in fury.

Harry noticed that its eyes were gone now. Dark blood gushed from their sockets, staining the Chamber floor and flying everywhere as the Basilisk coiled and thrashed. Harry was shocked to see that his efforts, however, had been futile. The bird, Dumbledore's Phoenix, had torn the eyes of Basilisk from their sockets. Harry's summoning of the mirror had been useless. Still, the Basilisk was blind. He'd struck a blow.

"No!" Voldemort roared in fury.

"It's been blinded!" Harry cried in heady relief. Now he had a real chance of success. All he had to do was decide how to use this opportunity.

"It matters not!" cried Voldemort. "The process is nearly complete! I will kill you myself! This is not over Harry Potter! YOU WILL DIE!"

Harry looked to Neville, who now was deathly pale. Harry knew from his appearance and from the wild declaration of Voldemort's that Neville only had seconds left to live. Harry then saw the diary near Neville's feet. That was the key, he thought. Bellatrix had stolen it from him for a reason. Voldemort had wanted it for a reason! It had preserved his memory. It must be what was tying him to this world, thought Harry. It must be like an anchor for him.

It had to be broken.

The Basilisk was beginning to steady and starting to settle from its ordeal. The Phoenix was gone. The thing it had dropped sat a few feet away. Harry looked toward it and toward the diary. One or the other, Harry thought. He could not possibly retrieve both. He did not know what the bird had meant for him to have. He had no idea what it was to be used for, and he certainly didn't have time to try and reason it out. On the other hand, he had a very good idea about the importance of the diary.

He made his decision.

Harry grabbed the diary

Before Voldemort or Harry or even the Basilisk could react, a scream of fury rang out through the Chamber. They both looked to see Bellatrix enter, a look of insane rage, the likes of which Harry had never seen before, contorting her face.

"They are coming, my lord! Kill him! We must leave!"

"Your wand!" Voldemort demanded, evidently in agreement. "I am strong enough! Give it to me!"

Bellatrix did not hesitate. She threw her wand into the air. It zoomed toward Voldemort, as though seized by magic.

Voldemort's hand snatched it from the air, he spun to aim it at Harry.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The jet of green was like an explosion of light as it flew across the Chamber floor. Harry could not avoid it. He could not duck or dodge. He would not be able to escape the curse this time. The Basilisk was still alive, Neville would die, and Hogwarts would end. He had failed.

He held up the diary in front of his chest just as the Killing Curse reached him. It slammed into the cover of the diary. Harry was thrown back in a explosion of white-hot light.

Harry felt an intense, ringing agony all throughout his body before everything faded to black.

XxX

Now wasn't the time, he thought. It was far too early. Things had to be put back into place in order to ensure the school was functioning at full capacity. The Ministry was engaged in civil war. One side argued that Hogwarts mustn't be allowed to reopen because, even though the business with the Chamber of Secrets was now finished, it had opened their eyes to one extremely important fact: the staff of Hogwarts was incompetent and not fit to provide the children of the

Wizarding community in Britain with adequate protection against the major threats that the world of magic could pose. Then, there was the other side that (rightly, in his opinion) insisted that the side arguing that Hogwarts should not reopen was fully of cowardly morons that were nowhere to be found when solutions were begged for in the Daily Prophet by Rita Skeeter. Dumbledore could not provide one, and neither could the complainers. It was a freak attack set on by ancient magic that was impossible to stop because nobody had any idea what was actually behind it. The truth was discovered by a student of Hogwarts. That should show them that they were wrong in their assessment. The fact that a student, taught everything he knew about magic by the staff of Hogwarts, was able to solve an enigma all by himself that nobody else could even begin to investigate was proof enough that the teachers at Hogwarts were doing a fine job, and that the students should remain there because they were receiving a quality education.

Plus, the timing of this entire ordeal was horribly inconvenient. It was nearly Christmas. There were numerous requests to sort through from dozens and dozens of concerned parents. McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and he himself, Severus Snape, had been looking in to them for a very long time. Not only that, but Potter had not yet regained consciousness. This, as strange as it seemed, worried Snape.

Snape shook his head as he pushed open the door to Dumbledore's office. What was becoming of him? When the boy had entered Hogwarts, Snape's assessment of him had been quick, and in Snape's mind, accurate. Potter had proven Snape's assumptions correct at every chance he had for the first few months of term. Then, everything had changed when the boy had succeeded in doing what Snape could not. He'd caught Quirrel in the act of serving the wishes of the Dark Lord. Not only that, but he had stopped Voldemort from acquiring the Philosopher's Stone. He'd done so in a fashion that made Snape reassess him. Harry Potter was not his father's son. He was smarter, more subversive, but still just as reckless. The whole business with the Chamber of Secrets had proven that to Snape. Still, it was an improvement upon Snape's original assumptions. Harry Potter wasn't James Potter, despite his physical appearance. Snape had come to a decision a long time ago. He would no longer blame Harry for the wrongdoings of his delinquent father. Harry was different. Harry was a Slytherin.

And, above everything else, Harry was also the son of Lily Potter, and Snape knew full well that it would dishonor her memory if he were to continue to associate Harry with James, and attempt to exact his revenge upon James through Harry. It was not right. Snape knew that he was not an honorable man in any sense. He'd done wrong for most of his life, and he'd likely do wrong in the future. But, today, his mind was in the right place. He would not stray from the path he was on now. Nothing would stop him.

"Ah, Severus," said Dumbledore cheerfully from behind his desk. "Please, have a seat."

"Gladly, Headmaster," said Snape. There was a hint of mocking politeness in his voice. Dumbledore might have noticed the mockery, but Snape could not tell. The Headmaster smiled warmly. He, thought Snape, would have done so no matter what attitude Snape had entered his office with.

"I understand there are problems that need solving at the moment," said Dumbledore, "after all, I am the Headmaster of this school."

"Indeed," said Snape neutrally.

"I know the chaos all too well," Dumbledore continued, gesturing to a massive pile of letters that lay on the floor near his desk. "These are the concerns that nearly every parent of every student here has. I've been getting this kind of mail for months. It's actually quite bothersome, and, over the past day or so, it has peaked. I can never sort out what's relevant anymore. With all my experience, I have never found an effective spell to sort out junk mail."

"You sound like a Muggle," Snape commented. Muggles in this day and age were always complaining about junk mail, or something they referred to as 'spam'.

Dumbledore chuckled merrily. "Yes, I suppose I do! But, down to business, Severus. You understand that I understand the chaos we're facing, even though the ordeal with the Chamber of Secrets is now behind us. You should also understand that I would not have called you here unless it were important."

Snape nodded. "I understand, Headmaster."

"Good. Severus, what I am about to tell you is of the utmost importance and must be treated with extreme caution. I have been considering things for the past day or so. I've had a lot of time, you see, since I've decided to ignore the persistent complaints in these letters. Hogwarts will not be closed. I am tired of telling people. They will simply have to be shown. In any case, what I am about to tell you is information that must never be given to anyone else. If you are to divulge it, you will tell only one person, and, when the day arrives that you must divulge this information, you will know it. Until then, it will be our secret."

"Of course, Headmaster," said Snape.

"I know I can trust you Severus. My asking is merely meant to illustrate an important point: that this information might be impossibly valuable in the coming years. Most of what I've deduced is guesswork, but it is educated guesswork. In order for you to begin to understand what I am beginning to understand, I must show you something."

Dumbledore opened a drawer in his desk, and pulled something from it. He shut it, and then placed the object upon the polished surface of the desk. It was a book, the book that Snape had seen in the Chamber of Secrets. A crater seemed to have been punched halfway through the book. Its ruffled pages stained as black as its leather cover with ink. The aura surrounding the book, if such a thing was possible, was the aura of death.

It had been found in the hands of Harry Potter. He had been lying on the floor next to an unconscious Neville Longbottom. Bellatrix had escaped by the time they'd entered the Chamber, and the Basilisk they'd found there had been blinded. Dumbledore, McGonagall, and he himself had all three performed a rather extraordinary feat of magic in order to kill it. Really, it had been simple. The skin of a Basilisk was much like dragon hide. It was nearly impossible to break by either physical means or magical means. Its only weak points were its eyes and its mouth.

They had approached the Basilisk, an immensely dangerous thing to do, but, since it was blind and unable to see them, when it struck, it missed. They had joined together and to cast a simple, albeit frighteningly powerful concussive curse that had been well-aimed. It had easily flown into the open mouth of the Basilisk and destroyed

its brain by means of concussive force. Had it not been blinded, and had Dumbledore not been with Snape and McGonagall, the Basilisk most certainly would have killed them along with Harry and Neville.

They were lucky the Headmaster had found them in time. It had been Flitwick and Snape that were searching for Harry after it was determined he'd disappeared. McGonagall had joined them on the second floor. They'd entered the girl's lavatory on the second floor where they had found a sobbing Moaning Myrtle. Snape had demanded she come for. He'd asked her what she was crying about.

"A boy came in here," she had told them, "asking how I died."

"What boy?" Snape had forcefully demanded.

"Harry Potter," she'd replied, confirming their fears. "He opened that sink, over there. He used Parseltongue! It was horrible!"

Snape had been shocked that Harry had used Parseltongue. He wasn't sure Moaning Myrtle understood what she was saying. In any case, he had told Flitwick to run off to fetch Dumbledore, then he and McGonagall had worked to open the 'sink'. They succeeded through a combination of Snape's knowledge of Dark Magic and McGonagall's understanding of the way ancient wards functioned. Snape had gone down first while McGonagall waited for Dumbledore and Flitwick to return.

After sliding down the pipe that led from the sink to the cave under Hogwarts, Snape had encountered something he had not expected. The entire situation that played out afterwards had been a mess, caused entirely by Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Evening, Severus," said Bellatrix, wearing a mischievous half smile. Snape stood and drew his wand.

"Where is the boy?" Snape demanded.

"How should I know?" she returned. "Probably dead, dying, or in unspeakable pain."

"Why are you here?"

"No, Severus, the question is, why aren't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about, you traitor! The Dark Lord would want to kill you himself if he knew you were here!"

"How could you possibly know what it is the Dark Lord desires?"

"He's been inside me, Severus! He's shown it to me. We can't talk about it, though. I have to kill you. Avada Kedavra!"

Snape had dodged her Killing Curse and retaliated with one of his own. His aim had been off because of his awkward position after avoiding her curse. Bellatrix missed death by a foot, and retaliated with some insane, unspeakable curse of her own creation. Snape had seen it before and had the unique knowledge of how to disarm it. He did so, but the aftereffects were like a concussive explosion that shook the walls of the cave they stood in and threw both Bellatrix and himself off their feet.

They gathered their bearings and stood to face one another again just as McGonagall, Flitwick, and Dumbledore arrived from sliding down the pipe. Bellatrix looked at them, desperate insanity in her eyes, she was far too outnumbered.

"Ah, good evening Bellatrix," said Dumbledore.

She aimed her wand at the wall of the cave. "Get back! Throw your wands to me!"

"Perhaps you have not noticed you are outnumbered?" said McGonagall. "Drop your wand immediately or I will not hesitate to kill you. There are two students in this terrible place and both of them are in mortal danger!"

"Oh, you have not idea!" retorted Bellatrix.

"Please," said Dumbledore. "Bellatrix, I implore you to remain calm. No one in this cave has to die tonight. I want to know where Harry Potter is."

Bellatrix cackled gleefully. "Oh, I wish you could see, Albus! I really do! Sorry, though. You can't!"

And without warning she gave her wand a hard slash. A boom echoed throughout the cave as it began to collapse. Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore were forced to shield themselves from the impending rock slide.

They had managed to protect themselves quite easily, but Bellatrix had temporarily thrown a heavy obstacle in their way. They spent time removing rocks and attempting to clear a path, but Bellatrix countered them at every possible point. Dumbledore had skirted her counters with certain measures Snape had not quite understood, but it had suddenly become easy after a short time. They'd broken through the rock and they'd come upon the Chamber of Secrets. By that time, it had all been over.

Dumbledore's voice suddenly regained Snape's attention.

"This," said the Headmaster, "is the old diary of Tom Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean to say that the Dark Lord was foolish enough to publish his innermost thoughts and feelings in a book?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Not in the conventional sense. You and I both know Voldemort too well for that. You see, Severus, I believe this diary was a vessel. I believe Voldemort used it to preserve a sliver of himself. Neville awoke some days ago. I questioned him about his experience with the diary. From what I can tell, one could interact with the diary, when it was still magically viable, as one could interact with any type of instant communication device. When a word or a sentence was written in the diary, it disappeared, and was replaced by an answer from Lord Voldemort.

"This is not a simple parlor trick, Severus, as you may well understand. The answers that Neville received from Lord Voldemort were cunning, manipulative answers. Lord Voldemort was operating the way he has always operated, but through the use of a book. Not only that, but, I believe Neville Longbottom was possessed by Lord Voldemort, and not only Neville, but also Ginny Weasley.

"So, we must ask ourselves, how is it that Voldemort was able to possess not one, but two separate children through the use of a book?"

"Possession is complex, Dark Magic, Headmaster," said Snape. "One must possess the capacity to be conscious when possessing someone else, and the only way to be conscious is to have a mind or to invade your host with your soul, at least, we will call it a soul for lack of a better definition. The Dark Lord did not have a body, so he did not have a physical mind or a way to channel magic directly. Therefore, I must conclude that he invaded their bodies with his soul."

"My thoughts as well," Dumbledore agreed. "And then, we have the matter of this book. Harry brought it down into the Chamber of Secrets for reasons I can only guess. I assume he was communicating with Lord Voldemort through the diary. Perhaps Voldemort told him to bring it with him? We can only discover the truth when Harry wakes up. Until then, I believe we must assume that this diary somehow was used to house Lord Voldemort's soul, or at least what remains of it. Now, I assume, he has fled elsewhere."

"Interesting theory," Snape remarked. "However, it is unlikely. I do not understand how a soul could inhabit a non sentient object. It defies every law and theory about this type of magic."

"Not every law or theory," said Dumbledore cryptically.

"What do you mean?"

"I was wondering if you knew. I see now that you do not. I will tell you in time, Severus, once I've had a chance to study this phenomenon more. Until then, I think it best that I remain silent."

"I understand," said Snape. And he genuinely did. Years ago, he might have insisted that Dumbledore stop speaking so vaguely and just tell him what it was he thought. Perhaps then, with two minds, they'd both be able to formulate a plausible hypothesis and then act upon it. That, however, was not the way Dumbledore worked, and Snape had come to accept that. He held a healthy respect for the Headmaster. If Dumbledore did not wish to speak of his theory, then he had a good reason.

"Now, let's assume that the diary was a vessel for Voldemort's soul. How, then, did he manage to break the wards in the Gryffindor Tower and the Chamber of Secrets, and how did Bellatrix Lestrange enter this castle?"

Snape narrowed his eyes at the name Bellatrix Lestrange. That woman was a fanatic. She was demented, insane, and extremely dangerous. Not only that, but she was a vehement supporter of the Dark Lord, one that wholeheartedly believed in his philosophy. That was the most dangerous kind. She and Snape had never got along very well. She had been jealous of him, and he had been irritated by her jealousy. It was a rather consuming distraction.

"I have no idea how Bellatrix Lestrange managed to enter this castle," said Snape. "I know that we were all unprepared to the rock slide she caused in the cave leading to the Chamber. I also know that she would be incapable of breaking the wards here by herself. The only people I could even imagine disabling any ward in this castle without any assistance whatsoever are you and perhaps the Dark Lord."

"Yes, I believe you are correct, Severus. Lord Voldemort breached the wards."

"How?"

"I believe he used all the strength he had to leave the diary the night Neville was taken into the Chamber of Secrets. He himself invaded Neville's body, and then used Neville as a puppet to channel his own magic to temporarily disable the Apparition Ward in the Gryffindor Tower. He then contacted Bellatrix Lestrange. He undoubtedly used Occlumency on Neville and saw that she had escaped. She arrived in the Gryffindor Tower. They must have used a spell to ensure the other boys in Neville's dormitory remained asleep. Then, together, they somehow entered the Chamber of Secrets, and Voldemort began to somehow drain Neville's life force and as he did so, an image of him, more defined than that of a ghost, but similar to a ghost in many ways, began to become clearer."

"That is impossible," said Snape immediately. "All of it."

"Is it, Severus? If there is an alternative explanation, I do not know it."

"What you're talking about is impossible. The Dark Lord, as powerful as he might be, could not have gone from the diary while it was in Potter's possession to the body of Neville Longbottom. Even if he could, there is absolutely no way he could have broken the ward in that dormitory, spelled all the boys, and then called Bellatrix Lestrange into the dormitory. It's inconceivable."

"And yet is the only explanation that explains everything."

Snape shook his head. "How did Bellatrix escape us, then?"

"The wards in the Chamber were broken completely. Lord Voldemort was the Heir of Slytherin. He broke the wards. Bellatrix simply Apparated."

"Your theory is preposterous. There is, however... one detail that might corroborate."

"And what is that?"

"When I met Bellatrix down in that cave, she told me that the Dark Lord has been inside her and shown to her his thoughts. I thought it was more of her fanatic ranting, but perhaps there is a grain of truth to it."

"I believe there is," said Dumbledore. "Although I doubt Voldemort would have revealed his thoughts to her, if such a thing were even possible."

"I agree," said Snape.

They fell into silence, each pondering the implications of Bellatrix's words. In reality, it hardly mattered that Voldemort had entered the castle, or that Bellatrix had. They were gone and it was over. There were more pressing matters to deal with now. Of course, they would have to examine the wards around the castle and perhaps do patchwork here and there. That was a bit of shock, to know that Voldemort had broken the wards. He could do so again in the future when they weren't expecting it. That was a frightening idea.

A knock then sounded on the door to Dumbledore's office. Snape and Dumbledore exchanged looks, and both of their expressions signaled that they had said all they needed to say to one another, and that the conversation was over. They might resume pondering in the future, but for now it was better left alone.

"Enter," called Dumbledore.

The door to the office immediately opened. McGonagall entered, looking more flustered than normal. She'd been in a foul mood for days. Now, it looked that her stress had finally broken her, because she looked like a cross between someone who is overjoyed and someone who is completely apoplectic.

"Potter is awake," she told them.

Dumbledore wasted no time.

Pardon my language but holy shit, that was sloppy. Harry and I both learned a valuable lesson. Do NOT make up crap as you go along and do not rush recklessly into situations without thinking them through entirely. Bad writing, bad Slytherinism. All I can ask is that you attempt to look past my absolutely horrible blunder here. I realize it's pretty major... Anyway, I won't be making the same mistake twice. Part 3 will be coming up soon, and it will involve Sirius, Bellatrix, and Wormtail. It will be strictly Voldemort-less, and we'll get to explore a certain dynamic between Harry, Sirius, Wormtail, and Bellatrix. I already have a lovely character-driven climax in mind for Part 3 which will be much simpler to write and plot and far more resonating than this debacle you see above this note. Grill me if you feel the need, my readers! Xarkun has screwed up!

And once again there is a long chapter. Now you get to have a cliffie leading to falling action since we're past the climax! Yay?

Chapter 31: Hints

Harry had never been hit by a truck, so he couldn't say with any validity that he felt like he'd been hit by a truck. He had fallen off a broom before, and that had been painful, but it was nothing compared to this. He didn't know how long it had been since he'd woken up. He'd been aware of nothing but his major discomfort and pain from the moment he drifted into full consciousness. Eventually, he was able to determine he was lying on a bed in the Hospital Wing, there was a bandage wrapped around his head, and his right arm was in a sling. As to how he sustained injuries to his arm or his head, Harry had no idea. He didn't remember doing anything to cause them. The last thing he could recall was a sense of sure dread; the feeling of knowing his end was at hand. After that, he'd been hit with the Killing Curse. So, by all rights he ought to be dead.

But he wasn't dead. Or, maybe he was. If he was, then it was painful. Everything hurt. His muscles, his skin, his organs, his brain, his joints, and even his bones. He suddenly and involuntarily cracked a smile. His thoughts sounded like those of an old person. His joints hurt? How ridiculous. But it also hurt to smile, so he stopped. He closed his eyes when he realized that he was staring at the ceiling of the Hospital Wing. It was daylight, and the sunlight streaming in to the room hurt his eyes as well.

Harry simply laid there in his bed for a time, with his eyes closed and his breathing soft and even. He was exhausted; physically and mentally. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but his body or his brain would not allow it.

He wasn't sure how long it was before Madam Pomfrey noticed him stirring and determined he was awake. She asked him how he felt. He muttered something about the pain, but he didn't want to describe it all in detail since even his teeth were sore and every time he opened and closed his mouth to form a word, a jolt of pain shot through his jaw. Madam Pomfrey muttered something and returned with a tonic or a potion or something of the like. Harry hadn't really been listening to what she was telling him. He was trying to clear his mind so he could sleep.

He felt the end of a vial on his lip, and Madam Pomfrey ordered him to open his mouth and swallow the liquid inside the vial, or she'd pry

his mouth open for him. Harry was annoyed. He thought up an angry retort and was on the verge of using it, but he refrained from giving in to the impulse. It wasn't worth the discomfort. He decided, though, that he ought to open his mouth and swallow before Madam Pomfrey acted on her threat.

The potion she gave him tasted sweet at first, but its aftertaste was cold and made his throat feel dry. Madam Pomfrey left him when he was finished drinking. Soon after she had gone, Harry noticed that his discomfort had lessened, and that the pain really wasn't so all-consuming and omnipresent anymore. In fact, it was very localized. Now all he had was a headache. Compared to what he'd been feeling before, the headache wasn't that uncomfortable at all.

And then the door to the Hospital Wing opened. Harry opened his eyes to see who had entered. It was Dumbledore. Today, he wore a set of deep blue robes that were conspicuously plain, compared to his usual, star-adorned attire. He produced his wand and magicked a chair into existence next to Harry's beside. He sat down, pocketed the wand, and folded his hands on his lap. He smiled warmly at Harry, looking at him over the half-moon spectacles that rested on his crooked nose.

"Good evening, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry noticed the sunlight from the room was fading. It was twilight now.

"Good evening," said Harry, purposefully leaving out Dumbledore's title from his acknowledgement. He wasn't in the mood to deal with the eccentric, senile, old Headmaster. Not now. His headache was suddenly more uncomfortable.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, if you are feeling up to it, of course."

Harry didn't see how a refusal would help him. There was something he did want to discuss with Dumbledore, and he reasoned that if he was willing to listen to the Headmaster, then the Headmaster would be willing to listen to him.

"All right," said Harry.

"First, I should be fair and fill you in on what you missed in the Chamber of Secrets. What is the last thing you remember?"

"Voldemort was there," said Harry. He paused for a beat, waiting to see if Dumbledore had already known. By the looks of it, Dumbledore wasn't surprised to hear that Voldemort had been in the Chamber. "But it wasn't really him... it was like a memory of him. He told me his name was Tom Riddle, and he said he was stealing Neville's life force to return... Is Neville alive?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Longbottom is in much better shape than you are, actually. When he awoke, he was actually quite lively—forgive the pun—for being so close to death. He was able to fill me in on a few things. What do you know about the diary of Tom Riddle or, as we know him to be, Lord Voldemort?"

"I found the diary in that same bathroom that the entrance to the Chamber was in. Somebody stuffed it into a toilet and tried to flush it."

"Yes, that would have been Mr. Longbottom."

That made sense, thought Harry. Only Neville would be foolish enough to try flushing a book down a toilet. Only he would think that was a viable idea. Also, Harry remembered very clearly that a ceramic pot of soil had been wedged against the toilet and the stall wall, weighing down the handle. Obviously, it had been from the greenhouses. Neville loved Herbology. Harry should have known.

"Yeah, well, I found the diary. I brought it back and I found out that if you write in it, Voldemort answers, but I didn't know he was Voldemort. I asked him about the Chamber of Secrets. He told me about the Basilisk, and that's when I knew that Hagrid was innocent for sure. The papers said he was caring for an Acromantula last time."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "You are more resourceful than I had thought, Harry, but I suppose it is unwise to underestimate you. After all, you found the Chamber when no one else could. But, what I would like to know is how you found the Chamber with only the knowledge that a Basilisk was the monster inside of it."

"What happened to the Basilisk?" Harry asked suddenly, remembering that it had only been blinded, but hadn't died when he'd lost consciousness.

"One thing at a time, Harry," said Dumbledore. "First, tell me how you found the Chamber only knowing that a Basilisk was inside of it."

"That's not all I knew," said Harry, remembering that Voldemort had told him a bit more. "I knew that it killed a Muggle born girl in a bathroom, and I thought it had to be that bathroom because... A while ago..."

"It's understandable that you'd like to keep it a secret, Harry. Being a Parselmouth is a rare phenomenon."

"How did you know?" Harry demanded. Dumbledore, despite his eccentricities, never ceased to surprise Harry with how much he knew. It was rather unsettling.

"You forget that the ghost of that girl that was killed, Myrtle, saw you open the Chamber of Secrets and heard you speak in Parseltongue."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, recalling Myrtle's reaction to him speaking Parseltongue in order to open the Chamber very vaguely. "She flew into her toilet like she was afraid after I told the Chamber to open."

"Yes, I expect she would have. Did she tell you the full story of her death?"

"I think so."

"Did she leave out the part about Lord Voldemort being in the bathroom at the time?"

"What?"

"I've spoken to her before, Harry. She told me that before she died she heard a voice in the bathroom, and by her description that voice was speaking in Parseltongue."

"Oh," said Harry simply.

"Yes, so you can understand why it frightened her to hear it again."

"Not really. She's dead already."

"Naturally, although I'm sure it is a rather traumatic event for her to think about."

"I guess," said Harry. "Did she tell you I was a Parselmouth, then?"

"Not exactly. Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall interrogated her in the bathroom before I arrived. She told them exactly what happened and they informed me."

"Oh," said Harry again. "How did you get into the Chamber, then?"

Dumbledore smiled. "It's rather simple. Parseltongue is a set language. It's nearly impossible for those of us that are not gifted with the ability to speak it to discriminate between separate words and sounds. I, however, have studied Parseltongue. I know a few words. The nature of the language, however, the magic surrounding it, prevents me from understanding the meaning of the words I know. I can say the words, but I do not understand their meaning. I can only tell you that they are all different. Luckily, one of the words I know opened the Chamber for us."

"What words do you know?" Harry asked, unable to help his curiosity.

Dumbledore smiled again. "I apologize for my mispronunciation in advance."

After that, he proceeded to issue four different words in rather poorly imitated Parseltongue. They sounded like an old man's erratic breathing after he'd had to sprint for too long. Still, they were meaningful to Harry.

The words Dumbledore knew were 'hello', 'hornet', and, conveniently 'open'. The fourth thing he knew was not a word, but a phrase. It was rather wordy in English, but relatively short in Parseltongue. It was also quite distinct in the way that it sounded. It literally meant: 'I am not a bumblebee.'

How Dumbledore knew that phrase, or any of the other words, Harry could not fathom.

"That's interesting," Harry remarked.

"Quite so," said Dumbledore. "Now, tell me exactly how you knew to find the Chamber, please. The full details this time, uninterrupted by me."

"Right," said Harry. "Voldemort told me about the Basilisk. I found his diary in that bathroom when I went in on my way from one of McGonagall's classes. I heard a voice..."

"A voice?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Yes, in the walls. I realized it had to be the voice of the Basilisk when I found out what was inside the Chamber, and that I was a Parselmouth."

"Ah, I see," said Dumbledore critically. "You mean to tell me, Harry, that you discovered the location of the Chamber with nothing but thin, circumstantial guesswork? And, of course a bit of luck and desperation."

"I guess you could look at it that way," said Harry.

"Well, I suppose that is how all great discoveries are made," said Dumbledore. "I myself have been searching for the Chamber of Secrets all year, and I failed to find it. I understood that Salazar Slytherin was a cunning man, of course, but I never thought to look in a lavatory for the entrance to his secret Chamber."

"Yeah, I suppose that's the genius of it."

"Indeed it is, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Now, it is best to let me do the talking. I will explain everything to you. You see, Harry, it all revolves around that diary that you found."

"Right," said Harry. "What happened to it?"

Dumbledore smiled rather grimly and pulled the diary from the pockets of his robes. He held it out before Harry, inviting him to take it. Harry grabbed it, and realize he was staring at the back cover. He

turned it around to the front, and was completely surprised at what he found. Harry had heard of meteors falling from space and impacting the surface of the Earth with such force that they punched craters, hundreds of times larger than the meteors themselves, into the ground. It looked as though a meteor had hit the diary. A kind of crater had been punched halfway through the book. The edges around it were charred, and the pages inside were stained with what looked like dried ink.

"What happened to it?" Harry asked.

"I'm not entirely sure, Harry," Dumbledore admitted. "Madam Pomfrey described your symptoms upon waking up to me. Did you come in close contact with a Killing Curse?"

"Yes," said Harry. "The last thing I remember is Bellatrix Lestrange giving her wand to Voldemort, and then Voldemort used the Avada Kedavra Curse on me. I held up the diary. I couldn't avoid it. It must've hit it..."

"Hmmm," said Dumbledore, a thoughtful look upon his kind, elderly face. "Very interesting. You see, Harry, that diary preserved a part of Lord Voldemort. Voldemort was nursing that part of himself with the life force of Neville Longbottom in order to return to mortality. I believe that the diary would have been nearly impossible to destroy with the aid of most magic. You are extremely lucky, Harry. Lord Voldemort destroyed his own source of power and failed to kill you at the same time because of chance timing. After that, he would have vanished as though he hadn't been in the Chamber of Secrets at all. I assume our friend Bellatrix followed soon after him.

"When I arrived in the Chamber, they were long gone. The Basilisk was still living, although Fawkes, my Phoenix—you've met him before, of course- blinded it. I was able to kill it along with Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Flitwick. We combined our powers into a joint spell. The technical parts, I'm afraid, are beyond your knowledge of magic, Harry. However, the Basilisk's skin is much like dragon hide. It is nearly impenetrable. The only weak points upon the body of a Basilisk are its eyes and its mouth. We were able to launch a spell into its open mouth and it was killed."

Harry had no idea how to respond to that, so he asked a question instead. "Fawkes dropped something after he blinded the Basilisk."

"Ah," said Dumbledore. "He was coming to help you, Harry. He gave you the Sorting Hat."

"The... Sorting Hat?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "It is actually a very useful magical item that serves more than just one purpose, its name is misleading."

"Well, I didn't get to use it," said Harry, not entirely sure that Dumbledore was sane. His perception of the Headmaster seemed to be constantly shifting. One moment, Harry hated him and thought him old, foolish, and senile. The next moment, he thought Dumbledore knowledgeable, wise, and only oddly eccentric. In those times, he wasn't sure if he liked Dumbledore or not.

"Yes, I know. Now, I believe I have explained everything I can to you at this present time. If need be, we can continue our discussion later after you have properly rested. Do you have any questions for me, Harry?"

Harry had several million pressing questions, but he was unable to process all of them at one time, and as soon as he came up with one question, another overtook its level of importance and became the new priority. He did, however, have several pressing issues weight on his mind.

"What about Hogwarts?" Harry demanded. "What's going to happen?"

"The Ministry has declared that Hogwarts is safe again," said Dumbledore, "although the parents of many of the students here are objecting. The Ministry is occupied in the hunt for Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange, so they are not listening very well. The situation will die down in a few more days, Harry. Hogwarts is safe. It will remain open."

Harry felt a rush of relief. He'd succeeded. Hogwarts would remain open. He would not have to return to the Dursleys now. It suddenly seemed fitting that it was nearly Christmas time. This was the best present he could have asked for or hoped to receive.

"What about Belfry, and the people who were petrified?" Harry asked.

"Professor Belfry's funeral service has been held. The Ministry doesn't want to deal with the ramifications of closing Hogwarts, and Belfry's death is the biggest argument that the parents who want this school closed have. They are keeping it quiet, ignoring it, really. As for the victims of the petrification, they have all been revived and have been up and about for several days now."

At that moment the doors to the Hospital Wing burst open and in walked a person that Harry never, ever wanted to see again in the entire time he had to exist in this current reality he existed in, or any reality he had no knowledge of that he might exist in a later time. That person was a pompous, smiling, foolish man wearing golden robes and holding himself in a ridiculously proud posture that simply exuded arrogance and an over abundance of disgusting self-admiration (not that self-admiration is always disgusting; it is only disgusting when it is grossly unwarranted).

That man was Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Harry!" cried Lockhart happily. "Ah, so good to see you awake! I've missed so much these past several months, you know. I have to commend you on a job well done! You found the Chamber of Secrets and saved the school, exactly as I would have done it had I been able!"

"Yes," said Harry. "I know."

Lockhart positively beamed at Harry's agreement, and Harry smiled back because Lockhart was, for once, right. Had Lockhart been able to, he probably would have foolishly rushed headlong into the Chamber of Secrets with no plan of action and no knowledge of the danger within. It would also have been in reckless desperation, as he probably would have wanted to prove that he was the greatest wizard ever to live. Harry had done the same when he discovered the Chamber, although his desperation had been borne of how much he valued Hogwarts as his true home. That was really the only reason his actions differed from anything Lockhart would have been likely to do. Although, Harry couldn't help but consider the other alternative: Lockhart would have simply run when things became too

intense. Harry really wasn't sure which path Lockhart would have chosen.

"You know, Harry, by popular demand I am being reinstated as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!" cried Lockhart jubilantly. "We have the whole rest of the year to spend together!"

"Right," said Harry neutrally, not even bothering to smile.

That simply was not going to happen.

Perfect name for the chapter, if I do say so myself. You see, it's clever because we have Horcrux hints in here (which I won't even touch upon again till like... year 6 or maybe earlier, dunno yet), as well as Lockhart's final demise hints. If anything, that will be the true climax of this Part 2, yes? The great Gilderoy Lockhart that I foolishly petrified rather than killed will finally meet his end! Sort of... Well... Oh, I have an idea! You all will enjoy this. Very Slytherin-esque and very simple, really. All Harry needs to do is steal something...

Next Two Chapters Titles:

Chapter 32: The Final Defense Against the Evident Mediocrity of Gilderoy Lockhart

and

Chapter 33: The Definitive Definition of Floccinaucinihilipilification

I promise you a spectacular ending to Part II with these two chapters and probably another transitory chapter that covers the end of year II and leads into the beginning of Part III which I am hesitant to title right away.

I didn't want to put this chapter up here on its own, but I've been very busy lately so I decided I must. The first of you that see this and read it tonight, know that I am working on the next one as you read.

Chapter 32: The Final Defense Against the Evident Mediocrity of Gilderoy Lockhart

Harry might have been worried about the result of classes resuming at Hogwarts. He could not name his apprehension, nor give it definition, but it didn't matter. Any worry he had immediately abated upon the first day of class. No one was disappointed to have to wake up early and head off to learn. That was a phenomenon so peculiar, that it made the atmosphere of the school feel thick with irregularity, as it had been during the time when the Chamber of Secrets was open and a threat. But there was one crucial difference: the atmosphere, while peculiar and strange, was not darkened with any sort of dread or looming terror. In fact, it was lighthearted and joyous. The danger had passed. Christmas was nearly upon them. No one had a care in the world. School work—even Snape's and McGonagall's assignments—seemed easier than ever before. Everyone was unnaturally friendly toward one another.

It was as if the absence of the threat of being killed or petrified from some unknown evil lurking about in some unknown chamber had revealed a new collective morality within the school. Everyone seemed to be suddenly acutely aware of how much they valued their lives, and how good it was to no longer have them threatened by a force which they could not protect themselves from.

All was well... for a few days.

Then the holiday fever began to kick in as the year began to die out, and the dates began to approach December 31st. The joyous atmosphere about the castle was tarnished and broken by ominous Prophet reports on Bellatrix Lestrange and Sirius Black. Harry tried not to pay attention to them. He had just saved Hogwarts from the Chamber and solved a mystery that had remained unsolved for hundreds of years. That was enough for the present.

For a few days after the beginning of Rita Skeeter's series of reports on the heinous crimes of two Death Eaters Bellatrix Lestrange and Sirius Black, the talk around Hogwarts was grim again.

Dumbledore threw a wrench into the collective mood a few days before the official end of classes at the start of the holiday break. He told them that Quidditch would resume in the Spring. He disguised the announcement in the guise of one of his rather tedious, random

announcement speeches that he had grown so fond of giving during the time when the Chamber of Secrets was still a threat. He'd talked about the reinstatement of Gilderoy Lockhart as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher (much to Harry's dismay and the entire female student body's delight), and of other tedious necessities such as the schedule for students returning home for the break. Then, at the end, right before he bade them all goodnight, he mentioned that the Quidditch season would resume in the spring, as if it were a trivial matter of little importance.

The entire student body had erupted in cheers so joyous and boisterous that Dumbledore had had to create an explosion that sounded like a gunshot in order to regain order. After that, he'd told them all goodnight, and they had left the Great Hall with higher spirits than ever.

Harry was in such a good mood, that he even forgot how much he hated Gilderoy Lockhart for an entire half of a class period.

Then Lockhart made a comment that made Harry's blood positively boil.

"My, my," said Lockhart, gazing at himself in a hand mirror as the class all chatted amongst themselves, "I am great."

Harry wanted to strangle him on the spot.

Harry spent the rest of that class period wracking his brains for ideas. At the very least, he wanted Lockhart canned. At the most—well, Harry felt guilty for thinking such thoughts. He focused on devising methods that would result only in the termination of Lockhart's employment, and, if possible, in the destruction of his unearned reputation. He decided he must not injure Lockhart in a physical sense, though Harry thought himself fully capable of accomplishing such a feat. He doubted Lockhart could defend himself from the simplest hex or curse, and Harry knew a few nasty spells that were certainly well beyond Lockhart's ability to contend with since they were second year level magic.

Harry took out his parchment and a quill and began to draw and write. He did it as a way to bring his half-formed ideas into a physical reality on paper, where he thought he'd be better able to sort them

out. Unfortunately, the bell rang and ended his efforts before he accomplished anything worth accomplishing.

Harry spent the rest of the day ignoring all his professors—with the exception of Snape—in order to devise a plausible, comprehensive plan to destroy Gilderoy Lockhart in the worst way possible.

He had a few notions by the time dinner came around. He sat in the Great Hall, mindlessly swallowing whatever food was in his reach and responding to Draco and Blaise only when there was a gap in the conversation.

Without warning, the nightly mail arrived and a hefty barn owl landed on Harry's plate, covering him in mashed potatoes, dropped a nightly copy of the Daily Prophet, stole a bit of food from the table, and flew off again, spilling Harry's goblet of pumpkin juice.

Several people around Harry laughed at the owl's intrusion. Normally, Harry would have been livid. He would have wanted to kill the owl, but at the moment he didn't mind it in the least. In fact, he was grateful for the gift the owl had given him. Upon the front page of the Prophet was yet another adoring article about Gilderoy Lockhart by the esteemed Rita Skeeter.

It seemed like such a simple idea, thought Harry. He didn't know how he had failed to think of it before.

XxX

The next day was the start of the holiday break. The students that were leaving were due to disembark aboard the Hogwarts Express at exactly eleven o'clock in the morning. Harry sat in the Slytherin Common Room as Draco and Blaise finished packing the various odd items they had forgotten to put in their trunks.

"Are you sure you don't want to come, Potter?" Draco asked again.

"Yes," Harry snapped, irritable about having to answer the same question for the third time.

"But my father—"

"Tell him I said thanks, but I can't leave Hogwarts," said Harry.

"But—why not?"

"You'll see," said Harry cryptically. He grinned as impishly as he possibly could.

Draco grunted something in annoyance and shut his trunk loudly. "Happy Christmas, Potter," he said before shoving his trunk roughly toward the pile of other trunks in the middle of the common room. They would sit there until someone magicked them aboard the Express. Draco strode away from Harry purposefully and in obvious indignation. Harry didn't care. Draco could be indignant if he wanted to be. Harry didn't feel bad about refusing Lucius Malfoy's invitation to join him and his family during the holiday. He had a very important gift to give that he couldn't possibly ensure was given in the proper way unless he was at Hogwarts.

"Happy Christmas," said Blaise tonelessly.

Harry echoed him without any emotion. Blaise turned on his heel and followed Draco out. He was neither indignant about Harry's rudeness nor excited about the holiday break. His manner was dull and robotic, as though he was apathetic toward everything. Harry vaguely wondered why. Blaise had always seemed mostly useless before, but he had had the tiniest spark of... something. Now that spark seemed to be extinguished. Harry got the impression that Blaise was simply echoing Harry's attitude. Over the course of the year, Harry had grown apart from Draco and Blaise. It hadn't been exactly purposeful, but it had necessarily been in full knowledge of what it was he was doing. Harry almost wondered if Blaise was as annoyed by Harry's near abandonment of them as Draco was. Harry couldn't imagine why he would be, though. Blaise was more Draco's friend than he was Harry's, and Draco was more Harry's friend than Blaise.

Harry dismissed the thoughts as arbitrary. He had a mission to accomplish today.

As soon as all the students that were leaving for the holidays were gone, Harry made his way to a place he didn't visit very often—the library. There, he spent an hour or two looking for books in which he could research potions. He had a plan that had come fully into fruition the night before. The plan was this:

Harry understood that Lockhart thought very highly of himself, and that he valued the unearned, adoring attention he received in disgustingly copious amounts. Harry thought that the best way to undo Lockhart was to play to that. By examining the Daily Prophet in more detail than he had ever done before, Harry found that there was a way to write the staff writers on the Prophet in order to provide tips, comments, or criticisms. Naturally, Rita Skeeter's public, business mailing address was the first on the list.

Harry knew that she would receive dozens, if not hundreds of letters on a daily basis. He also knew that most of them would be complaints and she probably ignored them unless they were uniquely different than all the others. The Prophet instructed all writers of letters to provide a subject line on the envelope that concisely explained the contents of the letter inside. Harry supposed that Rita Skeeter only read the ones that did not appear to be complaints, or the ones with the most interesting subject lines. Harry, however, reasoned that he would be able to disregard the criteria—his name on the return address would suffice. He was positive Rita Skeeter would read it immediately.

So, Harry wrote her a letter.

Dear Ms. Rita Skeeter,

I am writing to inform you that I can provide you with an exclusive, in-depth interview with Gilderoy Lockhart on Christmas Day. Professor Lockhart is very eager to share an exciting personal story with you, the likes of which have never been heard before. He instructed me to write you, as I am his favorite and most trusted student. Please respond as soon as possible in order to let me know whether or not you are interested in conducting the interview. If so, I will provide you with a time and location.

Thanks,

Harry Potter

A few days later, Harry tied the letter with a small length of red string around Hedwig's leg. She stared at him the whole time with wide eyes that were, in reality, completely static and devoid of any actual emotion. Somehow, though, they seemed hurt and annoyed. Harry

patted her on the head and apologized for not coming to see her in such a long time. He explained that the Chamber of Secrets had become a problem that distracted him from her, and that he had had to find a way to stop the problems it presented from occurring, otherwise they would both have to go back to the Dursleys and Uncle Vernon would lock her in her cage. After that explanation, Hedwig seemed more than appeased. Still, she tore an owl treat from Harry's hand rather rudely, and when she moved to take off, she intentionally hit him in the face with one of her wings.

"Come on, Hedwig!" Harry yelled after her. "You should be thanking me!"

Hedwig responded by gracefully weaving through an open window in the Owlry and gliding off into the distance.

Harry shook his head and mentally crossed a task off his rather lengthy and complicated to do list.

He made his way back into the castle and began to search for Lockhart. It was now the morning of Christmas Eve, and Harry suspected he would find Lockhart in the Great Hall. Indeed, when he arrived, Lockhart, clad in his gold-colored pajamas, was sitting under the massive Christmas tree and examining the pile of gifts that had been delivered to him by fans earlier that morning. He turned to see Harry enter the Hall and his face lit up with excitement.

"Harry!" Lockhart cried, jumping to his feet. "Isn't it wonderful? Look at how many people love me!"

He cast a sweeping arm toward the pile of presents, grinning proudly, as though the fact that he had undeserved gifts sitting under a Christmas tree was some kind of major accomplishment.

"Yeah," said Harry tonelessly. "Wonderful. Look, Professor, I've got another gift for you."

"Really?" cried Lockhart. "Why, thank you for your kind consideration, Harry—where is it?"

"It should be arriving any minute now," said Harry.

He had received a reply from Rita Skeeter only three hours after sending Hedwig off with his letter. She had written (in a very poor example of penmanship) that she was extremely interested in conducting the interview and she told him that she was available at any time. Harry suggested Christmas day. He was now waiting for her confirmation. He expected Hedwig to arrive any moment.

Indeed, Hedwig swooped into the Great Hall clutching a hot pink envelope in her talons. She dropped it at Harry's feet, circled quickly around, dived a little too close to Lockhart's face, causing him to shriek in terror, and then flew out of the Great Hall, bound for the Owlry.

"I say!" cried Lockhart. "That owl of yours is demented."

"I agree, she's wonderful," said Harry, picking up the letter quickly. "This is my gift to you, sir."

He handed it to Lockhart.

"Er..." said Lockhart, giving the envelope a shake. "What is it?"

"Open it," said Harry.

"Oh, but that would be against tradition!"

"Not really. The actual gift comes into play tomorrow. This is sort of a confirmation that it's going to happen."

"Er...what?"

"Just open it and you'll probably understand." Harry used the word 'probably' because he had severe doubts about Lockhart's intelligence.

"If you say so, Harry," said Lockhart. "But I do feel quite badly about breaking the ancient Christmas tradition laid down by the founding fathers of that one religion—er... Scientology."

Harry blinked and tried to resist bashing himself in the forehead. The 'founding fathers of Scientology'? Lockhart was a moron.

Lockhart tore open the letter and dropped the discarded envelope on the floor. He quickly read through the paper inside and then lowered it so Harry could see his grinning face. The image was sickening.

"Why, Harry!" cried Lockhart. "This is brilliant! Rita Skeeter wants to write a Christmas special on me? I suppose it is only right that I give back to my fans with an exclusive, in depth interview!"

"Very right," agreed Harry.

"Count me in!" said Lockhart.

"Great!" said Harry. "Noon sharp on Christmas Day tomorrow. Your office."

"I'll be there!"

Harry smiled as he walked away from Lockhart and out of the Great Hall. Now that the set up for the meeting was complete, Harry had to ensure he got what he needed to make the interview go the way he wanted it to go. He had been researching in the library. When he'd thought of arranging an interview between Lockhart and Rita Skeeter, he'd known that, unless unusual circumstances were dictating events, Lockhart would simply regale Rita with a number of never-before-heard stories that were not actually true. Harry also knew that Rita would tempt Lockhart with several questions that would allow him to launch into long-winded tirades about how great he was. All of it would be lies.

The solution, then, was simple. All Harry had to do was get Lockhart to speak the truth. He remembered from somewhere in his studies or ventures in the realm of magical knowledge that there was a well-known potion that caused people to tell the explicit truth when under its influence. He'd checked out several books in the library and had skimmed through a number of them until he found what he was looking for.

The truth potion was called Veritaserum, and it was supposedly the most powerful truth serum in existence. One drop of it would cause even the most accomplished liar—even a liar using magical means to lie—to tell the truth in the face of any question they were asked. Harry thought that, since he had arranged the interview, he would

preside and witness it in order to give it credibility. He'd told Rita Skeeter this, and she seemed thrilled. She even hinted that she'd like to ask Harry a few questions as well about the Chamber of Secrets. Harry had hinted that he would answer them.

However, all Harry really wanted was to bring Rita and Lockhart tea. He would add a drop of Veritaserum to Lockhart's cup, and then Rita Skeeter would get the interview of a lifetime. It would be simple—so simple, in fact, that Harry berated himself for not thinking of it ages ago.

The complicated part would be obtaining Veritaserum. Harry couldn't understand a word of the instructions that the book contained on how to brew the stuff. It was incredibly intricate potion-making, far beyond his level of understanding. He could not hope to create a valid batch of Veritaserum in one night with no practice or prior experience whatever.

He needed help, or he needed ready-made Veritaserum. For that, he would go to Snape.

Harry descended into the dungeons, ignoring the uncomfortable chill, and made his way to Snape's office.

He stopped at the door, raised his fist, and then knocked three times.

"Enter," said Snape's drawling voice from beyond the door.

Harry grabbed the handle, twisted, and pushed the door open. He stepped across the threshold into Snape's office and then shut the door quietly behind him.

Snape was sitting behind a large, dark desk mulling over several papers under the light of a dim oil lamp. His office was small and cramped. It was also freezing. Harry didn't understand how Snape could stand such a place in the winter time. In the summer, however, it would have been nice.

Snape glanced up at Harry. His face was stoic, he showed no reaction.

"Er... Happy Christmas, professor," said Harry.

"Yes," said Snape tonelessly. "Have a seat, Potter."

Snape gestured to the single, straight-backed chair in front of his desk. Harry approached it and sat down upon it. The chair was hard, uncomfortable, and very cold. Harry fought off a shiver.

"What is your business with me on Christmas Eve, Potter?" Snape demanded.

"I had an important question about potions, sir," said Harry.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Really? I can't imagine this is for a purely academic purpose."

"It's not," Harry admitted.

"Indeed. Ask your question then, Potter."

"I was actually wondering if I could take a look in your private storeroom."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "And why would you want to look in my private storeroom?"

"For a potion."

"Naturally," Snape said. "I have never and do not ever intend to give a student—any student—access to my private storeroom. There are a number of very dangerous potions inside and it would be most unfortunate if one of them were to cause irreparable harm to a foolish student that attempted to use it."

"Actually, sir, I know what I'm doing," said Harry. "I'm looking for a specific potion."

"And what potion might that be?"

"Veritaserum."

"Veritaserum? Why?"

"I'm not sure I should tell you, sir."

"It doesn't matter, of course. I wouldn't allow you to access my storeroom no matter what your reason was. Even though Veritaserum isn't, by its nature, extremely harmful, it can still be very dangerous when in the wrong hands."

"I know," said Harry.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "What is your intention, Potter? I demand that you tell me."

"Well... just think of it as a present for Professor Lockhart."

"Interesting," remarked Snape. "You understand, Potter, that I could never give a student access to a dangerous potion such as Veritaserum for any reason, especially if they intended to use it on a staff member here at Hogwarts. Such an action could result in their immediate expulsion and the termination of my employment here. However, if a student were to walk down this corridor and enter the secret passage to my storeroom behind the tapestry on the left and steal a potion without my knowledge, I would be safe from any ramifications. Such a student would also want to take certain measures to prevent themselves from being caught. The only danger to such a student would be in my noticing that a certain amount of a certain potion was missing. However, I might hypothetically overlook such a thing, and that student would also be safe from any ill ramifications."

"I see," said Harry neutrally.

"Good," said Snape. "Leave my office now, Potter. I'm very busy and I have half a mind to give you detention for wasting my time. I have certain to take care of before the holiday tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said Harry. He stood up. "Happy Christmas."

"Indeed."

Harry stood up, pushed his chair in respectfully, and turned to leave. Snape's voice stopped him before he could even take a step.

"Oh, and Potter—one last thing."

"Yes, sir?"

"Let me make it clear that I don't care what House you reside in, I will ensure you are expelled if I ever get wind of anyone having any knowledge about the location of my private storeroom."

"What private storeroom, sir?"

Snape smiled—a rarity for the potion's master. Harry found it disturbing. "Exactly. Now, get out."

XxX

On Christmas Day, Harry woke up promptly at eight o'clock and found only one gift at the foot of his bed. It was a very lavish, expensive looking card that was evidently from Rita Skeeter. It contained a hand-written message thanking Harry tremendously for the opportunity he had presented to her. She was positively ecstatic, declaring that this interview would undoubtedly be the single biggest interview in her entire career. She insinuated that, if Harry ever was in need of something, he ought to send her an owl and she would do everything in her power to ensure that Harry got what he needed. She also insinuated that her power was limitless. Harry actually found the message to be rather egotistical. He believed that she would be willing to do anything for him, but he didn't believe she had the ability to accomplish anything. Although, the power of journalism was not to be underestimated. The power of writing itself, for that matter, was awesome. It was because of Rita Skeeter's articles, and Gilderoy Lockhart's clichéd and melodramatic autobiographical novels that almost every woman in the wizarding world was so enamored with him. Harry thought that, maybe, Rita Skeeter's power would be able to aid him some day for some reason, so long as she still considered the interview she got from Lockhart to be the single biggest interview in her entire career when it was finished. Harry wasn't sure how she'd react. He hoped it would be in a positive way.

Harry tucked the card away in his trunk before dressing into some comfortable robes and making his way up to the Great Hall where he was greeted by a Christmas breakfast so delicious and scrumptious that it nearly caused him to forget about Lockhart.

Then Lockhart did something inappropriate, as usual, and Harry remembered him.

Halfway through breakfast, Lockhart rose to his feet and banged loudly on his goblet with a fork.

All the heads in the Great Hall (there were few, the staff table made up half the population in the entire Hall), turned toward Lockhart. McGonagall looked particularly annoyed. Harry got the wild impression that McGonagall wanted nothing more than to stab Lockhart in her throat with her fork. Snape, in contrast, did not look annoyed at all. He seemed amused, in a detached sort of way, by Lockhart's interruption of the Christmas breakfast. Harry wondered if that was a vote of confidence by Snape in Harry's ability to cause harm to Lockhart. Dumbledore looked thrilled by Lockhart's interruption, as though it were a great honor to hear him speak and as if it were the best present he could have asked for. Harry shook his head.

"Attention!" called Lockhart. "Attention!"

McGonagall stabbed her fork into her waffle, a terrible look of fury perched upon her face—so terrible, in fact, that it looked like she was in physical pain.

"I'd like to extend my sincerest thank you to Harry Potter!" cried Lockhart, gesturing toward Harry with a sweeping wave of his arm. Lockhart was dressed in gold and silver robes that shone brightly in the early morning sunlight. "Mr. Potter has given me the best gift anyone could ever give to me! An interview with the esteemed Rita Skeeter. Normally, as you all might be aware, I don't often partake in interviews because I don't believe many interviewers are worthy of my attention. However, Ms. Skeeter is! In addition, this is the best gift I have ever received because it gives me an opportunity to share things about my eternal greatness with my adoring fans—things they have never heard before!"

Lockhart beamed and turned his head to look everyone in the Great Hall in the eye. Harry could hardly believe Lockhart had just said what he had said. It was an entirely new form of arrogance from Lockhart that Harry had never before witnessed. Harry would go so far as to call it shocking. Indeed, McGonagall appeared to be biting her tongue. Harry knew she was dying to make a remark. He knew, because she was literally biting her tongue. He could see it. He wondered if she would bite through it.

"So, I propose a toast to Harry Potter!"

McGonagall positively glared at Harry. It was a look so intense, that Harry feared the heat of it might cause him to burst into flames right where he sat.

Lockhart raised his goblet for the toast. No one of importance followed suit (a few lovesick girls raised their glasses) except Snape, although Harry wasn't really sure if Snape was following suit or not. It was entirely possible that Snape was merely coincidentally lifting his goblet for a drink. Coincidence or not, both Lockhart and Snape drank at the same time, and then Lockhart sat back down and resumed eating his breakfast in a disgustingly jubilant manner.

Harry half expected McGonagall to snap and kill somebody. Harry thought he had heard from someone that it was unwise to ruin McGonagall's holiday. He thought maybe the source of that information had been a rumor about what the Weasley twins had accomplished last year. What that was, he couldn't entirely remember, but he thought that McGonagall had punished them by forcing them to stick their tongues to a frozen flagpole on one of the the castle's high-flying turrets, after which she had forcibly ripped both of them free. Harry wasn't sure he believed that, though. It seemed unethical and rather harsh, even for McGonagall.

The breakfast eating resumed in relative silence. A few Ravenclaw girls were staring enviously at Harry, however. Their looks seemed to suggest that they would give their wand arms to be in his position—to have Lockhart's supreme favor.

Harry tried to ignore their stares but he found he had no appetite and decided to get up and leave.

As soon as he stood, Lockhart, who had evidentially been waiting in eager anticipation for this moment, stood too. He followed Harry out of the Great Hall like a puppy following its master. Harry tried to remember that he was about to ruin Lockhart's career. It was only nine o'clock, and Rita Skeeter wasn't due for another three hours. Harry would only have to endure Lockhart for that much longer. He just had to keep telling himself that.

As Harry left the Great Hall, trailed closely by Lockhart, he thought he heard McGonagall snap something in the silence behind them.

It sounded like: "For the love of Merlin, Albus, fire the fool before I explode. He's ruined my holiday!"

Then Harry thought Snape said: "Calm yourself, Minerva. I'm sure everything will be fine."

Then McGonagall screamed: "CALM, SEVERUS? CALM! DO NOT DARE TELL ME TO BE CALM! YOU FEEL EXACTLY THE SAME WAY I DO!"

Lockhart bumped Harry with his elbow.

"Merlin, Harry," said Lockhart. "I reckon she's going through—what is that condition?— the PMS syndrome."

"Actually sir, what you just said is redundant."

"What do you mean?"

"PMS is an acronym for Premenstrual Syndrome."

"I don't understand how that is redundant."

Harry shook his head. Lockhart was an idiot. Also, he was very insensitive to women. Harry wondered if he could get Rita Skeeter to ask Lockhart what he thought of his colleagues. Perhaps he would say something like that about McGonagall and be forever hated by women for his insensitivity. However...

"Never mind, sir. But I think it's only an American phenomenon—PMS."

"Well, of course it is, Harry!" cried Lockhart. "You remember that Howler I received from Ms. Loretta Beauregard, don't you?"

Please don't be mad at me for the PMS joke. I'm not insensitive! Lockhart is! On a side now, I did read somewhere that PMS is an American phenomenon and other women around the world typically don't experience. Or maybe I'm confusing that with the post menopausal condition... Look, either way, the reference to Loretta Beauregard is funny.

Chapter 33: The Definitive Definition of Floccinaucinihilipilification

It took Harry a very long time to persuade Lockhart to wait in his office while Harry went down to the Entrance Hall to greet Rita Skeeter. Lockhart argued with Harry for over an hour about it, although the term 'argued' would have to be applied loosely to the situation since Lockhart was so indecisive about the best course of action that he had actually agreed with Harry over twenty times (Harry had stopped counting there) and then changed his mind a moment later.

By the time Lockhart finally gave in, it was nearly eleven thirty. Rita Skeeter was due to arrive in half an hour. Harry, red in the face from frustration with Lockhart, rushed down from the third floor to the Entrance Hall. It was deserted. This was good because he had to get the Veritaserum he had taken from Snape's private storeroom immediately. He hadn't counted on not being able to get away from Lockhart after he left the Great Hall. Harry shook his head, berating himself. Had he learned nothing from the Chamber of Secrets?

On his way through the main corridor of the dungeons, he met Snape who decided to stop him for a short word.

"Potter," called Snape. "I'd like to stop you for a short word."

Harry stopped and tried to hide his aggravation. "Yes, sir?"

"I'd like you to hurry up and do whatever it is you're doing. Minerva is beginning to drive us all mad."

"She really hates Lockhart, doesn't she?"

"Yes," said Snape. "So do I."

Harry nodded. "We all do, sir. I'm actually on my way to 'do whatever it is I'm doing' right now."

"Good. Also, this conversation consisted only of me warning you that you would have detention if Lockhart ever makes an announcement about you in the Great Hall again."

"Right, sir."

"Good. And that is actually true. I will give you detention if Lockhart ever makes an announcement about you in the Great Hall again. The aftermath with Minerva is simply too much to deal with. Even the Headmaster has become irritated."

"Got it, sir."

"Good. Happy Christmas, Potter."

"Same," said Harry.

He rushed off to his dorm to grab the Veritaserum. It took him a few moments to dig it out of his trunk, then he sprinted all the way back to the Entrance Hall where he found a woman that could only be Rita Skeeter.

She was being escorted by Filch. A look of disgust was plainly evident upon her vaguely pretty face, but Filch didn't seem to notice. She had blond hair which was curled to perfection. Atop her head sat a little green hat with a long, acid green feather that matched the color of her velvet-like, green robes. She was wearing far too much makeup. Her lips were so red that Harry thought they looked like they were coated in blood.

Her sharp eyes caught sight of Harry as soon as he entered the Entrance Hall. She walked away from Filch, despite the fact he was still talking to her, and made her way quickly to where Harry stood.

"Oh!" she cried, extending a gloved hand for him to shake. "Oh! You are Harry Potter! Oh! It's such a pleasure to meet you!" She seized his hand, clasping it in a surprisingly painful, vice-like grip, and shook vigorously.

Filch, back in the distance, looked particularly annoyed. He glared furiously at Harry and then stormed off. Evidentially he had been hoping to impress Rita Skeeter and perhaps secure her for a date... or something far dirtier. Harry didn't understand how he found Rita attractive at all, but Harry supposed there was a bright side to having incurred Filch's ire. At least he knew that Filch wasn't necessarily a pedophile. A vicious rumor had been going around, spread by some 'classy' Ravenclaw girls that had insisted Filch had been staring at their breasts even though they hadn't gone through puberty yet and didn't actually have breasts that were worth staring

at by any standard... expect, perhaps, Filch's. Harry doubted Filch's pedophilia. Dumbledore wasn't that stupid.

"Oh, Harry—may I call you Harry?—thank you so very much for arranging this interview!" cried Rita Skeeter jubilantly.

"You're welcome," said Harry tonelessly.

Rita Skeeter mistook Harry's lack of inflection for shyness. "Oh, come now, Harry! Loosen up! It's just me! Well... I suppose I am a big name."

Harry blinked. Maybe the Veritaserum wasn't necessary. Maybe Lockhart and Rita would simply run off and elope and he would never hear from either of them again. They seemed perfect for each other.

Harry did not respond to Rita's comment, so Rita broke the silence before it became too noticeable or awkward.

"Anyway, Harry, I don't mean to be rude, but where is Professor Lockhart?"

"In his office," said Harry. His tone gave the impression that he would have liked to have added: 'exactly where I told you he would be in my letter'. But Harry did not add that because he had nothing to gain from being rude to Rita Skeeter, not even amusement.

"Of course!" said Rita as though she had known the answer all along and as if it were typical of Lockhart to be in his office—as if it were a thing to be admired. "If you would kindly lead the way, Mr. Potter?"

"Follow me," said Harry.

Harry led her as far as the entrance to the Grand Staircase before they ran into Dumbledore who was strolling, hands behind his back, and whistling a rather whimsical, lovely, and somehow sinister tune whose impact upon Harry's mind could only be described as 'nerve twisting'. Rita stopped short upon seeing Dumbledore and smiled broadly at him. Dumbledore stopped too and returned her smile.

"Happy Christmas, Ms. Skeeter," said Dumbledore.

"Happy Christmas, Albus," said Rita.

Harry raised his eyebrow at Rita Skeeter's audacity. He didn't really think it was appropriate for a reporter to address someone of Dumbledore's stature by their first name. Although, Dumbledore didn't seem to mind it because he was neither rude nor sane. Harry would have set Rita Skeeter in her place if his position and Dumbledore's were reversed.

"I enjoyed your last article regarding me," said Dumbledore brightly.

"Oh? Yes, of course! I knew you would Albus, you and-"

"Oh yes," interjected Dumbledore, cutting her off. "Your creative wording is simply inspiring. What was it you referred to me as? An 'impotent, elderly mental case that is obviously starting to lose it'? Oh, and also your creative placement of the words 'codgerly dingbat'. Very creative. I'm don't believe codgerly is even a word."

Rita Skeeter's smile disappeared. "Er... you're right! I don't believe it is a word. Shakespearean stroke of genius, I suppose. We writers have those from time to time, not that you would know."

"Actually, I would. I've written many essays in my time, all of them have won prizes," replied Dumbledore cheerfully.

"Oh, of course!" said Rita Skeeter, her face reddening. She glanced toward Harry. "Well, I'm afraid that I am very late for a meeting! Perhaps another time, Albus."

Rita inclined her head quickly and subtly toward the Grand Staircase.

"What?" said Harry, deciding that it wouldn't hurt to amuse himself this way.

Rita flashed Harry a smile laced with irritation and then turned that smile to Dumbledore.

"Silly boy," she said to Dumbledore but also to Harry. "He's escorting me, you see."

"Of course," said Dumbledore. "Well, I shall be leaving you. I am in need of a lavatory."

"That's nice," said Rita Skeeter in a tone that suggested she didn't believe it was nice at all. "Farewell, Albus!"

"Farewell," said Dumbledore. And then he walked quickly away, whistling that lovely, whimsical, and somehow sinister tune. Harry thought up a name for it: Twisted Nerve.

Rita Skeeter gestured for Harry to continue on, so Harry did.

He led her all the way to the third floor without being stopped again. They walked past McGonagall who cast Rita Skeeter a rather icy look. Rita smiled back in a false way. Harry was beginning to get the impression that the woman was a bitch. Her grin made Harry think of a laughing hyena.

They reached the door to Lockhart's office. Rita was trembling with anticipation and fussing with the hair beneath her little hat. Harry shook his head and, without even bothering to knock, threw open the door to Lockhart's office and entered.

Rita followed him closely. Their room was rather intimate. Lockhart, as Harry had instructed, had already laid out the proper implements for tea. On his desk sat a silver tray with two silver cups (Harry scowled because Lockhart had kindly forgotten him; Harry didn't mind too much, of course, he just hated Lockhart and the lack of a teacup for him was another good reason for that hate to continue). The tea kettle was hanging above a small flame in the fireplace.

Rita Skeeter, at Harry's side, shrieked like a schoolgirl and rushed to take a seat before Lockhart without even being invited. Lockhart beamed. Rita Skeeter swooned, having a view of his smile from so close. Harry could hardly believe her lack of professionalism—well, no... he could very easily believe it. He'd read her articles before.

Rita extended a gloved hand over Lockhart's desk, and Lockhart extended his own hand. Harry watched as they exchanged a handshake. It went on for far too long, so he pulled the tiny vial of Veritaserum from the pocket of his robes and held it firmly in his closed hand.

"Oh, Mr. Lockhart!" cried Rita Skeeter. "It is such an honor to meet you! I'm Rita Skeeter! Call me Rita!"

"Likewise, Rita," said Lockhart in what was meant to be a voice filled with suave and base masculinity (i.e. exaggerated sexuality), but rather sounded like Lockhart was growling at her. "Call me Gilderoy."

"Gilderoy!" squeaked Rita Skeeter giddily. "Oh, you are ever so charming!"

"Why, thank you," said Lockhart. "Perhaps we can take a trip to Hogsmeade after our interview."

"That would be simply wonderful!" exclaimed Rita. Then, as if she remembered her purpose, she pulled out her wand and magicked a long piece of floating parchment into existence. "Let's get this interview going, shall we?"

"Indeed," said Lockhart.

Rita plucked the acid green feather from the brim of her hat. Harry realized it was a quill.

"You don't mind if I use a Quick Quotes Quill, do you?" she asked.

"Of course not," said Lockhart. "It will give us more time to focus on the interview. I have many things to say."

Rita Skeeter giggled like a schoolgirl. Harry had seen enough. He grabbed the tea kettle off the fire, despite the fact it was hotter than the very depths of Hell, and set it on the tray in front of Lockhart and Skeeter. Neither of them took notice.

Rita Skeeter inserted the feather of the Quick Quotes Quill into her mouth and made a show of sucking it suggestively as Harry poured them tea. Lockhart watched her with rapt attention, a smile on his face. Harry gagged.

He finished pouring them tea.

"Sugar?" he asked both of them.

"No," they said in unison.

Harry shrugged, uncorked the vial of Veritaserum in his hand, below Lockhart's desk, and then reached up to grab Lockhart's teacup. While doing so, he stealthily poured a small measure of the truth potion into Lockhart's cup. He then grabbed the cup with his other hand and handed it to Lockhart who took it without thanks, and gulped it all down in one rude swallow.

Harry almost laughed out loud.

Rita Skeeter took a sip of her own tea and flashed a smile at Lockhart whose expression had abruptly changed. He was staring at her with a blank, glassy eyed look on his face. Rita released her Quick Quotes Quill and it floated up near her parchment, poised to write.

"Er..." said Rita, trailing off. "Is something the matter, Gilderoy? You look strange."

"I have an erection," said Lockhart simply.

Harry half laughed, half gagged, but succeeded in disguising it as a cough. The Quick Quotes Quill began to scratch furiously on the parchment.

"Stop that!" cried Rita to the Quill. It stopped, and then scratched out what it had written. "Why, Gilderoy. That's... that's... for later, perhaps. Now, on to business, I think, yes?"

"Yes," said Lockhart monotonously. "I wish to convey my eternal greatness to you."

"Indeed," said Rita with a grin. "Tell me about your eternal greatness. What do you want to say about it?"

"At first, I wanted to regale with you thrilling lies. However, I will now tell you the truth."

Rita Skeeter looked at Lockhart, her face screwed up in confusion. "You sound odd, Gilderoy. Is something the matter?"

"No, I feel fine."

"All right... Well, what can you tell me about your eternal greatness? How does it compare to the members of the other staff? How do you rate your accomplishments compared to say—Dumbledore? Say as much or as little as you wish."

Harry smiled as Lockhart opened his mouth to answer her questions truthfully. What he said, even Harry wasn't prepared for.

Rita Skeeter certainly wasn't either. As soon as he finished clearing up the extent of his lies, Rita Skeeter's Quick Quotes Quill exploded in a shower of acid green feathers; Rita Skeeter snatched the parchment, dropped her teacup, and ran out of the room sobbing.

"Wait," said Lockhart monotonously. "I must Oblivate you."

But Rita Skeeter was gone.

Lockhart turned his head to Harry. "Why did I say all that stuff? I just ruined my career."

Harry shrugged. "No idea, sir. But, doesn't it feel good to get all that off your chest?"

"Not really. I'm a textbook narcissist. My ego has just been ruined."

"True," Harry agreed.

"You know, Harry. I always liked you, but you can be a bit rude and insensitive sometimes."

"True," Harry said again. "Well, I will be going now. Happy Christmas!"

"I should Oblivate you too, Harry," said Lockhart. "It would be illogical, however, since I already told the Skeeter woman everything. So strange, my emotions feel so... monotonous. If I could feel anything but this terrible numbness I'm sure I would be sobbing."

"That's good," said Harry. "It should wear off in a few hours. Perhaps you'll be sad enough to hang yourself."

"Perhaps," Lockhart agreed. "What exactly should wear off in a few hours, Harry?"

But Harry was already gone.

XxX

GILDEROY LOCKHART: FRAUD!

By Rita Skeeter

Yes! The headline says it all. I, Rita Skeeter, esteemed staff writer of the Daily Prophet regret to inform the Wizarding World that Gilderoy Lockhart is a fraud. Yesterday afternoon on Christmas Day, I sat down to interview the supposed greatest wizard of our time. What he told me, I could scarcely believe. I thought Gilderoy Lockhart was a gentleman. But, almost as soon as I sat down, he informed me that he was sexually aroused by my presence and insinuated that he would like to engage in sexual intercourse with me shortly after the interview. I, being the lady that I am, immediately declined and got on to business.

I asked him: "What can you tell me about your supposed 'eternal greatness'? How does it compare to the members of the other staff? How do you rate your accomplishments to say—Dumbledore?"

What he told me, I never expected, but I know it to be the truth. Why he elected to tell me now, I don't know. I suppose that it was time. I suppose that he could not stand lying for another minute. I'd like to give him the benefit of the doubt in this tragic situation.

The following is Gilderoy Lockhart's answer to my question, word for word:

"Let's begin with the members of the staff here at Hogwarts. I am intimidated by every single one of them, even the creepy old codger, Argus Filch. I believe even he can perform greater feats of magic than I can. I dislike Minerva McGonagall with great passion, she is a horrid bitch. Severus Snape scares me to death, and so does Albus Dumbledore. My skill level, compared to anyone's on the Hogwarts staff would likely be zero.

"My eternal greatness is a lie. All of my books are lies. I began, years ago, interviewing wizards that had secretly accomplished great things. I asked them how exactly they had done it. They told

me, and I erased their memories—that is the only thing I'm good at, memory charms. Then, I proceeded to write down the tales of their escapades and call them my own. All of my books, I repeat, are fiction. I did nothing. I couldn't even beat a first year in a magical duel.

"I am not sorry for my lies. They have brought me great fame and fortune and women. I have had sexual relations with many of my fans, although I am so bad at it that I have had to erase all of their memories."

The rest of Lockhart's monologue could not be printed due to its inappropriate content. In general, he spoke of his fantasies regarding me. I was quite appalled to hear the extent of them and would never reciprocate such desires under any circumstances.

I wish this wasn't true, but it appears that Gilderoy Lockhart is a fraud in every sense of the word. No one is sure why he decided to come out with this information now. Perhaps the burden of living a lie was too much for him? Perhaps he truly wished to have the truth known.

As for doubters, it has been confirmed that Lockhart has fled from Hogwarts. The best theory is that he ran away in order to avoid the wrath of the public and the humiliation. This as good as confirms his guilt. I attempted to reach Headmaster Albus Dumbledore for comment but found my efforts stonewalled. It is a sad day for young witches and wizards everywhere. We have learned that our idol, our hero, Gilderoy Lockhart, is nothing more than a pathetic liar whose only accomplishment is an unusual talent for memory charms as well as an incomparable way with words. The image that Lockhart created will live on for us to aspire to forever, but we must remember to do it in an honest way.

For once, Harry liked Rita Skeeter's article although it was a tad melodramatic near the end. It didn't even annoy him that she had tried to paint herself in a more respectable light. He knew very well that she would've gone with Lockhart to 'engage in sexual intercourse' in a heartbeat had he not told her the entire truth about himself.

Harry was smiling when he set down his copy of the Daily Prophet on the Slytherin table in the Great Hall. It was the morning of the day

after Christmas. The Great Hall was sparsely populated by tired and contented students partaking in the wonderful breakfast Hogwarts had to offer.

Harry glanced up at the staff table to see Lockhart's chair empty. Dumbledore sat reading the Prophet with rapt attention, his eyebrows raised, a smile at the corner of his lips. McGonagall was making no attempt to hide her joy. The absence of Lockhart appeared to be doing wonders with her mood. She was happily making conversation with Hagrid and both of them were laughing, most likely about Lockhart. Snape sat with his hand resting on a copy of the Prophet, picking at his breakfast. He seemed to be thinking deeply about something.

Harry and Snape locked eyes for a brief moment and Harry was positive that Snape let out a small laugh.

Notes:

Twisted Nerve is an actual song. Youtube it. It's by Bernard Herrmann

Your author, Xarkun, has secured himself tickets to the Ozzfest in Tinley Park near Chicago on August 17th of this year!

Expect the next chapter to be a montage kinda transitory thing into Part III with a lengthy conversation between Harry and Dumbledore regarding the Dursleys.

Chapter 34: Leaving Home

It took a day after Lockhart's departure from Hogwarts for Dumbledore to officially announce the search for a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Rita Skeeter's report on the subject was lackluster and uninspired. She seemed very glum after discovering the truth about Lockhart. Her article lacked any sarcastic jabs or shallow insults. It also didn't pour heaps of undeserved praise or criticism on anything or anyone.

Harry read two sentences of it before dismissing it as unworthy of his time. After setting the paper down, Harry ate his breakfast and considered what it was that he should do with the time left to him on his holiday break.

He spent the rest of the day exploring Hogwarts, though he'd seen most of the castle already. Nothing was very new to him, but the fact that it was empty was different. To Harry, it was somehow comforting. It made the whole place feel even more like home. It seemed to him that Hogwarts was his. It was a place of relative peace and a place of knowledge. Those were the two things that Harry valued the most at that point. Peace and knowledge. Violence was unattractive to him, as was the thought of the hateful, immoral Muggles of the world. Knowledge was what he craved deep down, even if he didn't necessarily like the process of learning in school. Magic interested him more than anything except, perhaps, flying—though that was a part of magic, so he supposed it counted.

For his entire life, Harry had been called worthless, useless, and bad. In his solitude over the remainder of the holiday break, these things weighed upon him. They made him think. They depressed him. He spent a late night or two roaming around in dark corridors covered with the Invisibility Cloak. He liked to look out of the windows at the sprawling Forbidden Forest and the mountains surrounding the school on winter nights. The landscape, in the day, was breathtaking. At night, however, it was a more interesting aesthetic. Especially winter nights, where it was light enough to see everything because of the snow refracting the starlight and the moonlight.

Harry considered his life before Hogwarts. It had contained nothing but pain and suffering. This place gave him something that no place in the Muggle world ever could. It gave him a place that he was meant to reside in because of his undeniable nature. For years,

living under the roof of the oppressive Dursley household, he had considered himself a freak, a loner, a friendless child who lived with his uncaring aunt and uncle. Never did he really think himself worthless or unworthy of anything great. He'd always known that the Dursleys were wrong, and the only thing stopping him from accomplishing anything was his inability and lack of knowledge.

Hogwarts gave him a place to study, and a place to live his life free from the will of the Muggle world that hated and feared his kind.

Harry loved the place.

After the last week of the holiday break had ended, and all the students returned the day after New Years Day, a replacement for Gilderoy Lockhart was announced. Dumbledore was quoted in the Daily Prophet as saying "I cannot, on such short notice, find anyone of suitable quality to hire; therefore I will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts for the remainder of the school year myself".

Most of the student body was positively thrilled with this news. It wasn't contested that Dumbledore truly was one of the greatest wizards of modern time—perhaps all time. Nobody had ever considered being taught anything by Dumbledore before, but now that the collective student body had realized they were about to be taught a subject (especially a subject as interesting as Defense Against the Dark Arts) by the likes of Dumbledore, they all seemed honored and enthusiastic. Harry had never seen such a craze before, even during Lockhart's first few days as a professor at Hogwarts—and Lockhart was, after all, a very famous celebrity in the Wizarding World (or, at least, he had been at the time; now he was infamous). That wasn't to say that Dumbledore wasn't a very famous celebrity in his own right, but every student in Hogwarts seemed to take him for granted as Headmaster. Now that he was actually going to teach something... The mood and buzz in the school was simply indescribable.

Harry, in contrast, wasn't thrilled about Dumbledore's lessons. He still couldn't decide if he liked Dumbledore or not.

Dumbledore's first lesson did nothing to set Harry's opinion either way. It was a typical lesson, but somehow smoother. It was as if teaching was an occupation that Dumbledore was born to do. His lectures were done on the spot. They were eloquent and thorough,

as though he'd practiced them many times before. Harry, under Dumbledore's instruction, learned more about Defense Against the Dark Arts than he ever had under Quirrel, Lockhart, or even in his own personal studies.

The month of January transitioned into February without inconspicuously and without incident. There was still snow on the ground, and the air was still freezing. Everything on February the first was the same as it had been on January the first. Harry would go so far as to say that that particular month was the most normal month he'd experienced in his entire life. And that was not an exaggeration.

February marked the beginning of preparations for final exams, even though they wouldn't come for another four months. Every professor, except for Snape (who didn't believe in such methods) began to mix in reviews with their normal lessons in order to better prepare students for their exams. Dumbledore had implemented the policy and he followed it to the letter, except his reviews were more like new material for everyone because Lockhart hadn't taught them anything in the beginning of the year. It was a daunting task, thought Harry, for any teacher. Dumbledore had to prepare them for an exam by feeding them a course of material that was meant to be learned in the duration of a school year which was roughly a nine month period. Dumbledore had to teach it all in less than four months.

Somehow, as difficult and imposing as such a task seemed, Dumbledore approached it with ease and excelled. To Harry, the enormous amount of extra material the class had to digest didn't seem like extra material at all. Dumbledore used every second and every homework opportunity to his advantage. His lessons were calculated and planned to perfection. It seemed like any curriculum Dumbledore designed would be the perfect template for any teacher anywhere. Dumbledore never wasted a second.

Harry began to think that maybe he liked the Headmaster.

Without Harry even noticing, winter faded into spring, and the postponed start of the Quidditch season was fast approaching. Harry's time was so completely occupied with Quidditch practice and schoolwork that he had no time to think of anything else.

It was exhausting and rewarding to be so focused. Harry's tunnel vision resulted in great success in the classroom. He aced almost every quiz given to him in almost every single class except for Transfiguration which he found incredibly confusing. The faster McGonagall tried to teach, the more intricate, complex, and hard-to-follow her lessons became.

Before Harry even had time to process it, the day arrived for the first Quidditch match of the season. Hufflepuff against Slytherin.

The castle was alive with excitement during the days leading up to the game. After the horror of the Chamber of Secrets, it was good to once again be able to allow oneself to indulge in the excitement of the final few days of the pre-season.

The feeling of pure exultation that Harry experienced while taking to the air as Madam Hooch blew the whistle to begin the first game was indescribable. It only grew in intensity as the Slytherins completely shut out the Hufflepuffs, beating them by a colossal point margin that nobody except the Slytherins wanted to talk about because it was so embarrassing for everyone else.

If the rules of Quidditch were written so that one team did not have to take possession of the Snitch in order for the game to end, the Slytherins would have beaten Hufflepuff anyway because they scored over a hundred and fifty points before Harry finally located and seized the elusive Snitch. That night of celebration in the Slytherin common room might have been one of Harry's best ever at Hogwarts. Draco and Blaise were suddenly and abruptly his friends again. It all felt correct and right, and Harry was happier than he'd ever been.

For the next game, the Slytherins played Ravenclaw. It was an epic match—a game to be written about in the history books. It lasted for three hours and Harry and the Ravenclaw Seeker, an intensely attractive girl named Cho Chang, battled bitterly for possession of the Snitch. In the end, Harry beat her out, but only because he was flying on a superior broom.

For the third and final game before the last match that would decide the winner of Hogwarts' Quidditch Cup, Slytherin played Gryffindor. That match was more intense and suspenseful than even the Ravenclaw match and the Gryffindors would have won if not for a

well aimed Bludger knocking the Snitch from the hand of the Gryffindor Seeker. Harry had snatched it right then and the Slytherins were victorious.

The Slytherins would go on to win the Cup, thanks in no small part to Harry's ability as a Seeker. It was one of the best times of his life.

As March entered April, the Daily Prophet made a habit of printing articles about Bellatrix Lestrange and Sirius Black, both of whom were still at large. This hardly made a dent in the intensely euphoric mood that pervaded Hogwarts, but a few parents began to consider withdrawing their students again. In response, the Ministry sent down more Aurors to ensure the safety of the school. Everyone talked about the subject for a few days. They were sure that Fudge only sacrificed the Aurors because he wanted to appease the frightened parents. It was an unnecessary move, because Hogwarts was probably the safest place in Britain, but Fudge had to please the voters.

The Prophet began to circulate rumors about Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange working together. They attributed several random, seemingly unrelated murders to what Rita Skeeter christened "The Dangerous Duo". Harry didn't find it hard to believe that Bellatrix Lestrange would go out of her way to kill people for no apparent reason. He tried not to think about it, though. It was a dark spot that threatened to pervert the happiness he felt.

Finals came before Harry wanted them to, but he still thought that he did well—except, of course, in History of Magic. On a bright note, however, he hadn't fallen asleep during the exam so he reckoned that he at least hadn't failed it.

The date for the end of term was fast approaching, and Harry's happiness was rapidly disappointing. He was now forced to dwell upon returning to the Dursleys on a daily basis. He wanted so much to never see them again that the thought of inevitably returning to that vile household nearly made him scream. The worst part was that there wasn't a single thing he could do about it. Dumbledore was set on him returning to the Dursleys. Harry knew this. There was almost no way the Headmaster would change his mind.

Harry went to Draco and Blaise for help. They sat down one night, a week before term was due to end, but their brainstorming got them nowhere. There simply wasn't a viable solution.

The last week of school was one of the worst weeks of Harry's life. The euphoria was gone. It was replaced by feelings of anger, desperation, and anxiety. Everyone else, in contrast, was simply dying to leave for the summer. Harry envied them. He wished he had a true home to go to, but the reality was that Hogwarts was his home.

He had pushed his mental capacity to the limit, attempting to create a plan that would result in his not returning to the Dursleys, but everything seemed futile and naïve. Dumbledore would know anything Harry tried to do, and Harry would be stopped with extreme ease.

Harry had no other choice. The only thing he could do was try to talk Dumbledore out of it. This would be his final, desperate act.

On the evening of the day before the final day of term, Harry made his way to the Headmaster's office. He reached the familiar stone gargoyle on the second floor and realized that he'd come without knowledge of the password. Knowing Dumbledore, however, he could probably guess.

"Lemon drop," Harry tried. The gargoyle did not respond.

"Chocolate frog?" Harry tried again. Still, nothing.

"Licorice wand!" Harry practically shouted. Still, this was incorrect.

Harry named off at least a dozen more types of sweets before he finally got it right.

"Sherbet lemon!"

The gargoyle stepped aside to reveal a spiral staircase, slowly ascending upwards like a kind of magic escalator. Harry stepped on them and rode them to the top of a tall, round shaft where stood a door. Harry knocked swiftly three times.

"Enter," said Dumbledore's voice from beyond.

Harry seized the door handle, turned, and pushed the door open with a little too much might. It hit the wall with a thundering crack. Harry stepped in and allowed it to shut behind him, not even apologizing for the intrusiveness and utter rudeness of his entrance.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, stroking the Phoenix named Fawkes above the wings. The portraits of several of the late Headmaster's of Hogwarts turned to glare at Harry and some voice their disapproval of his attitude. Harry ignored them.

"Good evening, Harry," said Dumbledore politely. The look on his face was solemn. He waved Fawkes away. The great, majestic bird spread its fiery, red wings and seemed to float as his glided away from Dumbledore's desk. It flapped its wings only once, gracefully ascending to the height of a small window near the roof of the office, and then slipped through the opening with a kind of beautiful, awe-inspiring ease.

Dumbledore gestured toward one of the comfortable looking chairs before his desk, indicating that Harry should sit down, then he folded his hands and placed them upon his desk.

Harry sat down and glared at the Headmaster for a long moment of rather strained silence.

Finally, Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak.

"Ah, Harry," said the Headmaster sadly, "this day was coming, I knew it. I've known it all year. Before you even begin, let me state very clearly, as I told you in the beginning, that you must return to the Dursleys this summer. It is within my power to ensure another incident will not occur. I promise you that you will not be treated unkindly. You haven't any idea how much it hurt me to discover that your relatives were so severely mistreating you."

"Severely mistreating me?" Harry hissed, unable to reign in his anger. "They beat me. Have you any idea how much that hurt me?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, looking down and shaking his head. "Yes, Harry, I have. I'm terribly sorry to have to do this, but you must return. Your treatment will be better, I assure you. Your aunt Petunia and I have come to an understanding."

"She's not my aunt," Harry snapped. "I hate her. I despise the lot of them."

Dumbledore shook his head even more. "I'm so terribly sorry, Harry. So terribly sorry. I did not wish for this to happen. I did not realize before it was too late."

"If you're sorry, then don't make me go back there. Ever."

"You must," said Dumbledore. "I've already explained this to you, it's—"

"I don't care!" Harry shouted. "I don't give a damn! I can't believe you are doing this to me after everything I did this year! I found the Chamber of Secrets! I stopped this school from being closed! ME! And this is what I'm given in return?"

"I know," said Dumbledore, his voice weighted with sadness. "I know, Harry. I am very grateful to have you as a student at this school. You have proven your loyalty to Hogwarts time and time again. I am afraid, however, that you must return to your aunt and uncle's for the summer."

"But—"

"Harry, I realize it may not seem like it—in fact, it may seem just the opposite—but I am insisting you return for your own good. The protection your mother bestowed upon you when you died must be renewed every year until you turn seventeen. After that, it will no longer be valid. Every year, you must return to the Dursley's to renew to the protection."

"VOLDEMORT IS DEAD!" Harry bellowed. "He can't hurt me! He killed himself with that Killing Curse when it hit his bloody diary! You know it!"

"Unfortunately, Harry, it is very possible that Lord Voldemort is still alive—in fact, I am almost certain of it. As long as he lives, I cannot risk your safety. You are too important."

"My safety? Let me stay here! Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain!"

"No," said Dumbledore. "For you, Harry, the house at Number Four, Privet Drive is the safest place in the world at this moment."

"NO!" Harry cried. "I can't believe you're doing this to me! I-"

Harry was seething with rage. His throat was choked with fury—he was beyond words at this point. Dumbledore was staring straight at him, a look of almost intolerable pain on his face. Harry found it to be false and deliberately calculated.

"I'm very sorry, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly.

"No you're not!" Harry returned furiously.

"But I am," insisted Dumbledore, "sorrier than you can possibly imagine. I don't want to do this to you, Harry."

"So don't."

"But your life is far more important than your temporary discomfort."

"Discomfort? I'd rather face Voldemort than go back to that bloody prison!"

Dumbledore shook his head again, looking down at his desk. "Harry, perhaps I can offer you a fair compromise."

"Oh, really?" Harry cried. "And what might that be?"

"You must spend a full month at the Dursleys. Then, you may live out the remainder of the summer at the house of a friend."

"All right," said Harry loudly, still furious. "I'll go to the Malfoy's!"

Dumbledore sighed. "I don't approve of that, Harry."

"You mean you won't let me go?"

"I did not say that, I said I do not approve."

"I'm going."

"I know. I cannot try to stop you. I owe you that much."

"You owe me a hell of a lot more."

"I know," said Dumbledore. "I know, Harry. Please listen to me. Pick another house. Do not go to the Malfoy's."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you why. I don't have any evidence at the moment, or anything concrete. What you find at the Malfoy's residence, Harry, might set you against future visits."

"What do you mean?" Harry demanded.

"I know you, Harry. I—"

"You don't know me!" Harry spat. "You don't know anything about me! If you did, you'd know how much I despise those filthy—"

"That's enough," said Dumbledore. His voice was still solemn, but there was force behind his command. "I know you well enough to know that Draco Malfoy cannot remain your friend much longer. Soon, things will change. You will have to make choices, Harry. You may very well become aware of those choices during your stay at the Malfoys. I know you will choose correctly. I wish I could stop you from going and having to experience what you might experience. However, I can't. I simply can't reasonably protest. There is no way any ill events will befall you. You will be safe at the Malfoy's. However, you may very well lose something while you are there."

"What?" Harry demanded. "Stop speaking in circles! Give me a straight answer for once!"

"I can't," said Dumbledore. "We must make our own choices in life, Harry. Based on the evidence you have displayed about your character, Harry, I am certain you will make the correct decisions. However, I do not feel it is my place to influence your judgment. I cannot bring myself to tell you anything about this. You will lose too much."

"Save me from the worst of it then," said Harry. "And tell me. You owe me something."

"I owe you so much, Harry, but I am afraid all I can give you is what I have offered. Nothing more. I only wish that you would not go to the Malfoy's."

"Don't make me go to the Dursley's. Let me stay here for the summer, and I won't."

"That is not possible," said Dumbledore.

"Then I'm going to the Malfoy's."

Dumbledore shook his head. "If you feel you must, I won't try to stop you."

"Good," said Harry. "I agree with your compromise because I don't have another choice."

"I don't want you to look at it that way, Harry."

"There's no other way to look at it."

And before Dumbledore could say another word, Harry stood up and stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him. Dumbledore looked down at his hands on his desk and sighed. Things had gotten out of hand, but his choices were strictly limited.

XxX

Draco was very receptive of Harry's story about his meeting with Dumbledore and enthusiastic about the news that Harry would be staying with him for a good portion of the summer. Draco declared that he would send word to his father immediately and guaranteed that his father would approve.

Harry was numb to Draco's enthusiasm. The fact that he had to return to the Dursleys for any length of time cast a shadow over everything he felt. While the castle was alive with anticipation for the summer, Harry was felt sick inside.

The end of the year feast was entirely unremarkable. Harry hardly ate anything. The thought did cross his mind that this would be his

last decent meal for an entire month, but he decided that he would stock up on food from the Hogwarts Express tomorrow.

The year officially ended with Gryffindor edging out Slytherin for the House cup. Harry made eye contact with Dumbledore the second after he had announced Gryffindor's victory. He'd tried to assume the most vicious, accusing look he could possibly summon. A look profound enough to be a kind of furious question: "You couldn't even give me the House Cup for all I've done for this school?" In reality, the House Cup was merely a piece of metal shaped like a goblet. It symbolized the epitome of academic achievement—or it was supposed to. If Slytherin had won it, the victory would have been hollow of Harry.

Harry didn't want to get out of bed to leave the next day. He thought that the only thing keeping him going was actually his anger with Dumbledore. It was his driving force. Besides the fury he felt, his soul had otherwise been sucked dry.

He felt like a zombie as he finished loading the last few items he'd neglected to pack until that moment into his trunk. Hedwig stared at him blankly from her cage. Harry felt her empty gaze mirrored his empty soul. He was truly like a zombie, Harry thought. A zombie or a ghost. Devoid of everything but a buried, smoldering anger that could not be extinguished or released. Its only purpose was to serve as a rope that would keep him suspended above an empty, bottomless abyss for the next month of summer.

Harry didn't know if he hated Dumbledore or not. He would never know. All he knew was that he had to return to the Dursleys. He didn't know how he could stand that knowledge. It made him want to rip his scalp off, saw through the bone, and then pry his mind out piece by piece. It was so grating a thought, so abrasive and infuriating that he could hardly stomach it. But, he had to.

As he made his way through the Entrance Hall in tow behind Hagrid and the rest of the school, he was stopped and pulled to the side by an intent looking Snape.

"Potter," Snape said authoritatively, "I expect to receive a letter within a three day period after your return to that house."

"Why, sir?" Harry asked dully.

"To ensure they are no longer lowering you to the standard of an animal. You are superior to them. They know it. They are afraid of you. Their only weapon is in your willingness to cooperate with their rules and inhumane demands. Once you realize that, they will have no power over you. You will not have to dread returning to that house."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry. For the first time in several weeks, or perhaps several years, Harry felt his spirits lift.

"You will find, Potter, that evil in its cruelest, most inhumane forms is weak and impotent. It thrives on the sanction of the victim. That applies to the evil of your Muggles."

"I see, sir," said Harry. "I never looked at it that way before."

"Then you must acquire a new perspective or continue to feel the way you do."

"I will, sir."

"Good. I expect your letter. If I do not receive it, I will come to the house immediately and ensure that all is well personally. Do not tell the Muggles this. I am curious to see if they learned their lesson the last time."

"Okay, sir," said Harry, smiling genuinely for the first time in many days.

"Very good. Now, you must leave the grounds now or you will be left behind."

That didn't sound like such a terrible consequence, Harry thought. "Right, sir," said Harry anyway. "Have a good summer."

Harry realized at that moment that Snape was his favorite person in Hogwarts. He seemed to be the only staff member that really understood things, even if it didn't seem like it all the time. He was the brightest of the lot.

"Indeed," said Snape. And with that, the potions master turned on his heel and started intently for the dungeons.

Harry watched him go. The sight of Snape's cloak swirling away like a plume of black smoke as he descended into the dungeons was Harry's last look at the interior of Hogwarts. He left the Entrance Hall without another pause or look. The moment he stepped across the threshold of the door and onto the grounds he felt that he couldn't wait to return.

Notes: I have no idea what to call Part III, so expect a delay while I plot.

Also, when I attended the Ozzfest, I got there early and secured a place at the very front of the 2nd stage off to the left. I was 20 feet away from Zakk Wylde when he played with his Black Label Society. It was awesome! And, for being 62, Ozzy still kicks ass.

In addition, now that we've come to the end of another Part of this fanfic, I'd like to present you with some interesting statistics:

This fic currently (as of this exact moment) has 425 reviews and a total of 148,892 hits. It is also a part of 27 c2 communities, on the favorites lists of 338 people, and on the alert lists of 454 people. Thank you all for creating these awesome statistics!

If any of you are Star Wars fans, or interested in my namesake (the character Xarkun), I suggest reading the fic I recently posted called The Code of the Sith. It's done entirely with OC's, several of which are my own creations, and several of which are the creations of my good friend whose name I'm not going to mention because she doesn't want to be associated with the gruesome material that the story depicts, despite the fact that she designed a lot of it... What I'm saying is that that story contains torture. I got a fair amount of complaints from people about the Dursleys beating Harry early in Part II. If that kind of thing has no appeal to you, don't even touch The Code of the Sith. It's rated M for a VERY good reason. However, I will say the torture isn't done for torture's sake. It's a central part of the story which will be continued if it gets more attention. Anyway, with that I leave you.

Stay tuned for Part III.

Part III: The Three of the Damned

Chapter 35: The Typical Muggle

Harry could not remember a better summer. The last summer that he'd lived through that could rival the utter brilliance of this summer was probably when he was only a year old and still living with his parents. The reason that made this summer the best summer was that Harry had returned to the Dursleys for a grand total of three days and, as it stood, he might never have to return to Number Four, Privet Drive again.

XxX

Shortly after arriving at Platform Nine and Three Quarters and disembarking from the Hogwart's Express, Harry met the Dursleys. They stood, conspicuous in the setting of so many Muggles in King's Cross Station, grudgingly waiting for Harry to join them and return to their 'home', which could hardly be called a home and was little more than a prison.

Wearing a dangerous look, Harry silently accompanied them out of the station to their car. None of them spoke to him, and each of them wore a look to match Harry's, although, while Harry's look conveyed an impossible contempt, theirs conveyed a half-buried, poorly-hidden fear. It would have made Harry happy to know that they feared him had he not already known it, but he was well aware of the Dursleys' feelings toward him. It was their fear that had inspired them to commit the atrocities that Harry had been made to suffer through last summer.

Harry, with his unique nature as a wizard, had been unable to resist the Dursleys commands in any meaningful way. They had owned him because he could do nothing but allow them to control him. It was against the law for a wizard—especially an underage wizard—to use magic against Muggles, or to use magic in a way that Muggles would witness. In fact, it was against the law for an underage wizard to use any type of magic outside the walls of Hogwarts at all. Harry had had no tools to defend himself against the Dursleys last summer. The only thing he could do was weather the torment they inflicted upon him. He was made to sanction their evil.

This summer, however, Harry had a weapon in Professor Snape. Harry had spent the entire ride back to London aboard the Hogwarts Express thinking about his weapon. He'd created a plan. It was so simple and so easy that Harry almost doubted it would work. It seemed impossible, because it would happen so swiftly and so effortlessly. Harry needn't do anything. It was the Dursleys and Snape that had to act.

All the Dursleys had to do was confine Harry to his room and forbid his usage of Hedwig. That was it. Harry knew they would. He suspected they were shaken by the incident near the end of last summer when Snape and Dumbledore had entered their house and lectured them (in a rather blunt and threatening manner) about the hideous nature of their actions. But the Dursleys were disgusting, immoral people. Harry was sure they hadn't learned from their experience. When people feared something because of their ignorance, or their unwillingness to consider the facts about the thing that they feared, they became contemptuous of the object of their fear and eventually grew to despise it, especially if they had any leverage whatsoever over the object. The Dursleys had more leverage over Harry than Harry had over them, and they feared him. They, like all Muggles, chose to hate the unusual—the different. Muggles had been like that for centuries, in fact. Harry didn't remember much from attending Muggle schools, but he remembered enough to know that even the Muggles were aware of their own tendency toward prejudice and unjustified hate.

Harry thought of the slave trade, and of the treatment of Africans in the earlier centuries. Because Africans were black, and a minority in the Muggle world, they were despised and hated. It was the same with wizards, although it was accompanied by another element. Wizards were more powerful than Muggles, so Muggles would naturally be afraid of being usurped by wizard kind for control of the world. Harry thought the idea was ridiculous, of course. Wizards faced prejudice and fear from ignorant, stupid Muggles all the time. They understood the injustice and irrationality of such feelings. Harry didn't understand why any wizard would want to rule over a world of Muggles. The end result of such action would likely be a tyrannical dictatorship. Wizards were better than that. They needn't rule over a mindless horde of dirty animals. Still, despite the fact that a wizard was better than a Muggle by nature, Harry didn't understand the views of people like Dumbledore. He would never love a Muggle.

He love things that were below him. He was simply incapable of it. Somewhere deep inside his gut, he felt a pang of guilt at the idea, but he understood that the guilt was irrational. Muggles didn't deserve love. Why should he give it to them? He felt nothing for Muggles except hate. He didn't want to control Muggles, and he didn't want any other wizards to control them either. It seemed like an unforgivable display of hypocrisy. Muggles, however, needed to be taught something. They needed to be punished. The Dursleys needed to be punished.

Upon returning to the Dursley household, Harry was immediately ordered to do exactly what he thought he'd be ordered to do.

"To your room, boy!" commanded Vernon (Harry could no longer think of him as an uncle anymore) as soon as they stepped through the threshold of the house.

"Oh, Vernon," Petunia cried. "We can't do it! It's... it's... We mustn't lock him in his room!"

Harry almost laughed at her attempt to display what she obviously hoped would be interpreted as compassion, or, at the very least, logic. After all, Harry was a person, not a dog. He was a person that had never done any wrong to the Dursleys (at least, not yet), and didn't deserve the treatment they gave him. Petunia was obviously trying to convince Harry that she saw that, even though they both knew she didn't and never would. She failed at her attempt to convey compassion or common sense. Instead, she came across as fearful and timid. She was obviously thinking of the visit that Dumbledore and Snape had paid her and her husband last summer.

Vernon was either not thinking about the visit at all, or he was stupid enough to be confident that it wouldn't happen again.

"Oh, yes we can do it!" snapped Vernon. "And we'll lock that bloody pigeon of his up as well so he can't go sending letters off to his freaky friends, telling them how cruel we are to him. We give him a roof, we give him protection from danger, we give him food, and he is ungrateful! I say, we care charitable people, we are! We've gone above and beyond the call of duty—in fact, we don't even have a duty! We chose to accept the boy, right? Well, then he ought to live on our terms."

Harry bit his tongue. He wouldn't contest Vernon's words. He wouldn't argue. As much as he wanted to say that, since the Dursleys had chosen to accept him, they ought to live up to the responsibility that they had chosen to bear and treat him like a human being. Harry wouldn't say that, though. He would simply follow their orders and allow himself to be locked in his room. Then, Snape would come.

"But—but Vernon! We simply can't!" Petunia cried in futile protest.

"Of course we can! It's our house!"

Petunia fixed him with a look which conveyed a very clear meaning.

"I know what you're thinking," said Vernon in response. "I know, but it won't happen again! You know what happened last time? He sent them a letter! Well, he won't be doing that again. We'll keep that bloody bird of his locked up outside of his room in the cupboard!"

Hedwig, who was sitting in her cage atop Harry's trunk flapped her wings rapidly, causing a loud racket. Harry shushed her as Vernon exploded.

"That bloody rodent!" he cried. "I ought to shoot it! I can't have that thing in my house! It smells ghastly and never gives me a moment's peace! I have half a mind to—"

"You better not do it," said Harry.

Vernon sneered at him. "Why not?"

"Because if anything happens to Hedwig, I'll tell Professor Snape what you did when I go back to Hogwarts next year."

Petunia's complexion lightened considerably.

"Ha!" Vernon cried in triumph. "And who says you're even—"

"Are you really that stupid?" Harry snapped, unable to help himself. Vernon's intelligence was equivalent to that of a six year old child. His ability to reason was equivalent to a rock's ability to implement logic.

"What did you just call me, boy?" Vernon roared.

"Stupid," said Harry. "Don't get so angry. You really are. Your bloody wife knows what Professor Snape will do if he finds out about Hedwig. Imagine what he'll do if you try to keep me from returning to Hogwarts."

Vernon's eyes widened. "Have they taught you some sort of mind reading powers that that bloody institution?"

"No. I just know what your ideas are, and I know they're stupid."

"He's right, Vernon," said a wide-eyed Petunia.

"WHAT?" Vernon bellowed.

"I mean about that... Professor of his," she explained hastily. "We have to let him return, and we can't do anything to that bird."

Vernon growled angrily. He hated being defeated. "Fine, but it stays in that bloody cage!"

"But, Vernon—"

"See here, Petunia!" Vernon cried. "I will have some sort of order in my household! I will not allow these bloody pigeons to fly about at their whim! I refuse!"

Harry had a hard time resisting the urge to comment. It seemed to him that Vernon realized he was in a rather tight position. To be humane or not to be humane. What a dilemma, thought Harry. What a disgusting person his 'uncle' was to even be able to call the choice between such options a dilemma. To treat a person like a criminal when they did not deserve it, or to treat them like an innocent person that had never done any wrong. That was the single set of choices that Vernon was facing. To anyone with any sense of a moral code, the correct choice ought to be evident, not by compassion, not by love, not by any kind of favor whatsoever—by simple, pure logic. Harry hated Vernon and his wife, but especially Vernon because, not only was Vernon cruel, but the fact that his actions were unjustifiable was sitting right in front of his fat, purple face, and he was too stupid or too willfully ignorant to grasp it.

At least Petunia had a tiny spark of intelligence. She seemed to be trying to convince Vernon to not treat Harry like a prisoner. She wasn't, however, motivated by morals or human rationality. She simply understood that there were consequences for choosing to be the jailer of someone that didn't deserve to be jailed.

"Oh, but Vernon!" cried Petunia, "please, listen to me!"

"Listen to her, dad!" insisted Dudley, speaking for the first time since Harry had seen the Dursleys. Harry was actually shocked to hear his cousin agree with his aunt. Dudley had always enjoyed it when Harry was miserable. "I don't want those two men coming back!"

This time Harry couldn't stop himself. He had to explode.

"Really, Dudley? Neither do your mum and dad." Harry paused to look at all of the Dursleys. They were silent. Petunia was looking at him with an expression that conveyed intense fear and secrecy, as though she was trying to hide something, but Harry could see everything she was thinking. Vernon looked like he wanted to say something. His face had turned a nasty shade of red, but he appeared to be biting his tongue. Perhaps he was merely waiting for Harry to spout off some more and give him ammunition. In fact, that was probably the exactly why Vernon wasn't talking. Harry didn't care. Dudley was simply looking at Harry with a mostly blank expression that held traces of stupidity and awe. He was probably awed because he understood that his parents didn't want Snape and Dumbledore to return to the house, but he probably never suspected that Harry would understand it because he was suffering from the handicap of idiocy, just like his mother and father.

"I know none of you want them to come back," said Harry. "And I know why. You all do, too. You're just afraid to admit it to yourselves!"

"Afraid to admit it to ourselves?" hissed Petunia indignantly. "I'll gladly admit it! I hate magic and everything to do with it! I despise it! It's enough to have to shelter-"

"Shut up!" Harry roared. "SHUT UP! That's not it! Remember what happened last time?" Harry turned to Vernon. "You threatened to call the police!"

"I certainly did!" said Vernon in a tone that suggested he thought such an action would be more than just. "And I would have—"

"Yeah?" snapped Harry, cutting him off. "You would have called the police? Remember what Snape told you? That, if you did, they'd ship you off to a prison the next day? You know why? Because you are terrible people. All three of you! You want to be normal, nonmagical... MUGGLES? You've been failing miserably ever since I was born! Do you know why? It's not because I am a wizard—"

"Shush!" cried Vernon in a choked voice. "Not so—"

"It's not because I'm a WIZARD!" Harry shouted, putting as much power as he possibly could behind the enunciation of the last word. "It's because you are criminals! It's because you abused me like a couple of psychotic... child abusers!"

Vernon opened his mouth to make an angry retort, but closed it immediately. Petunia was staring at Harry, stricken. Dudley was looking from Petunia to Vernon and back again, trying to gauge their reactions, possibly so he could decide what his own should be. Vernon looked simply aghast. Harry wondered if that was because it disgusted him to be reminded of the truth, or if it was because Harry had suggested it.

"That's right," said Harry. "Normal Muggles don't usually abuse children. I'll give you all one thing—I am a wizard. Normal Muggles fear wizards. Normal Muggles would hurt me, just like you have. Actually, I take it back. You are all normal Muggles. You're terrible, rotten, normal Muggles who should have the good sense to be... abnormal. But, you can't. I don't understand why."

Petunia and Vernon exchanged looks.

"I despise all three of you," said Harry quietly, and as a matter of fact. "I hate you, and I hate every Muggle like you—and they're all like you. None of them want to accept that we are who we are."

"Out," said Vernon in a quivering voice. "Get out of this room this instant. Get up in your room and leave your bloody trunk and that damn owl down here."

"Vernon..." said Petunia meekly, trailing off. Everyone ignored her.

"Fine," said Harry calmly. "I'll go."

"Don't let me catch sight of you again—all summer!"

"Whatever," said Harry.

He walked swiftly past Petunia who was standing, frozen in place, and started up the stairway. He paused two steps up and looked Vernon straight in the eyes.

"Shameful, huh?" he asked. "You're ashamed to look at me."

"Brilliant," said Vernon through gritted teeth. He was clenching his fists. "Exactly right."

Harry nodded. "That's how you should feel, you rotten idiot. You keep avoiding the truth, though. One day it'll catch up to you."

"Shut up," said Vernon tonelessly, but with full authority. "To your room. Now."

Harry shook his head and finished his ascension up the stairway. He walked a short way down the hall, turned, and opened the door to his room. It smelled stagnant and looked neglected. It seemed as though no one had set foot inside of it since he left to clean or tidy it up. His bed sheets had not even been changed.

Harry sighed and flopped down upon the bed of his prison. He spent a long time staring at the ceiling until he heard the door lock.

Harry thought, as he lay there on his bed, that he might go insane if not for the fact that Snape would soon intervene. His plan had worked. It was a guarantee. Now, all he had to do was wait. He had three days to figure out what to do when Snape arrived.

Hello! Welcome to Part III. Sorry for the long wait! If you have any questions about my rationale or the validity of my new plot points, please feel free to review them! I will answer. Note that this is the introduction. The next chapter is where things really begin. I've livened things up a bit. I took a few questions from reviews I received a while ago and used them as a part of the plot. You'll see

what I mean next chapter. Oh, and it took me forever to come up with a title for this part. I finally settled on something that has to do with my idea for the climax.

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Chapter 36: The End of the Magic

The first day of Harry's confinement passed uneventfully. It drug its feet, however; like Harry did when he understood he would have to leave Hogwarts. Of course, when Harry had leave to leave Hogwarts, he was the one dragging his feet in an effort to slow down time—which always seemed to move so much faster in such situations. The opposite was true of Harry's first day of confinement. Time was still his enemy, but it was his enemy because it was dragging its feet and passing by so slowly.

The second day was much like the first day. The grandest, most exciting thing to occur was Harry's short lived journey to the bathroom where the Dursleys so humanely allowed him to relieve himself and shower. They called it humane, at least. Harry ignored them. Such an allowance wasn't humane. Harry was positive the Dursleys wouldn't have let him out at all if not for the necessity. The human condition was, unfortunately, well-defined. Even though Harry was a wizard, he still had to consume food and drink like every other mortal, and, like every other mortal, his body had to get rid of the waste eventually. Petunia undoubtedly could not stomach the idea of Harry's necessity manifesting itself upon the carpet of his room, despite the fact that the Dursleys avoided the room as though it was a bomb rigged with a motion sensor that would detonate unless they kept as far away from it as possible. Petunia knew, somewhere deep inside her tiny mind, that the room was still a part of her house. Her house had to remain sanitary.

After the second day ended and the third day began, time slowed even more. Harry spent the entirety of the third day sitting by his window and looking out at the lawn of Number Four, Privet Drive. He ignored the food that the Dursleys slipped him. He didn't even glance toward his door to see what the it was—Harry was sure it could hardly be considered food anyway.

The weather outside on the third day was gloomy. It was also hot and humid—stuffy, Harry thought. Stuffy like the room which was his prison. The uncomfortable temperature and humidity, accompanied with the dreary gloom, made everything seem a tad lazier, and a tad slower. It also frustrated Harry that the Dursleys wouldn't turn on their bloody air conditioning. He heard Dudley complaining about that very thing downstairs. Petunia told him it was broken, but insisted they would buy him a present later for being such a good

boy and enduring such a hardship. Vernon agreed and said something or another about Dudley deserving an award for weathering the weather without the comfort of air conditioning because, since their broken air conditioner wasn't using electricity, it was helping the environment. In short, Dudley's sweat was good for the earth. Therefore, he deserved to be rewarded by being driven all the way to the toy store and all the way back. He would likely be given several new toys, all of which would come in plastic packaging and... Then Harry got bored with that line of thought and dismissed it as nonsensical. It had only eaten up thirty seconds of the day anyway.

Hedwig flapped her wings impatiently as it started to get close to dusk. Her cage was beginning to reek. All was quiet in the house because the Dursleys were napping. Humidity caused drowsiness—even Harry had had to fight off sleep a few times. Somehow, the tiny 'racket' that Hedwig had made aroused Vernon who launched into a long winded, very loud rant about how owls were going to give him a heart attack one day because of the sheer amount of stress they caused him to endure.

The Dursleys then left for the toy store to further spoil their child.

Harry watched them pull out of the driveway, just as the sun was setting.

The sun set. Snape was still not there.

Harry opened the window. The air outside was beginning to cool. It was a welcome relief.

Harry dozed off near what he estimated was nine o'clock at night and he awoke as the headlights of a car assaulted his eyes near what he supposed was ten o'clock. The Dursleys had pulled into the driveway—back from their trip.

Harry heard them talking about something that he assumed had to be a movie when they entered the house. Perhaps they had spontaneously gone to the cinema after the toy store to see a film, thought Harry. Although, spontaneity didn't fit the character of the Dursleys, so Harry was forced to assume they were actually trying to talk about real life, and that they were just so stupid that their conversation sounded like a discussion of a movie.

An hour later, the Dursleys went to bed. Snape had not arrived, and the third day was reaching its end.

This fact hit Harry hard enough to make his heart sink. Snape had promised to come if he had not received word from Harry in three days. It had been three days, and Snape was not there.

Betrayal, thought Harry. It wasn't really a thought he'd ever entertained about anyone before, nor had he ever really felt its accompanying emotion. It was like someone had ripped a hole in the lining of his stomach, and the acid within had poured out into his intestines. He felt angry—so angry he gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to slam his fists down upon the window sill. He wished he could break the wall—that was the magnitude of his anger. But he knew he couldn't. He could only sit there, alone and abandoned, fuming inside, and waiting to explode.

After a while, the anger abated and was replaced by a feeling that caused him to get up and pace around the room. His movements were erratic and restless, and his frustration made it seem like the walls were closing in on him. The space wasn't enough for him to exhaust what he felt. He was like a fly in a jar. Eventually he was going to suffocate and die.

The feeling was like someone had poured ice into his stomach and constricted his throat. He wasn't sure what was worse. The fury or the sense of abandonment.

Why should he feel abandoned though, he thought? After all, he'd been abandoned all his life. Abandoned for the Dursleys. Everyone in the wizarding world knew his name. It was Dumbledore, Harry thought. Dumbledore that gave him to the Dursleys. Ultimately, Dumbledore was the reason he was here. But, if he traced the events further back, only a few hours further, he came only to Voldemort. Harry wasn't sure who he hated more. Voldemort, for murdering his parents and dooming him to a life of torment, or Dumbledore for volitionally placing him in to his life of torment.

He wondered if he should hate Snape, too. Snape had broken his promise. He had not come for Harry. It would be well past midnight now. Four days into his summer stay with the Dursleys. Snape had guaranteed he would come in three if Harry had not made contact.

Had Snape forgotten? Harry wondered. It wasn't comprehensible. It had barely been four days since they had spoken of it. No, Snape could not have forgotten. He could only have chosen not to come. His action, too, was volitional. Snape, like Dumbledore, had abandoned Harry.

Now, thought Harry, he would have to suffer the rest of the summer with the Dursleys unless or until the Malfoys came for him...

Then a street lamp died.

Harry's attention was instantly focused outside on the street lamps of Privet Drive.

All his thoughts vanished in an instant. They were gone so wholly and so swiftly it was almost like magic. The emotion that accompanied them had been overpowered. Now anticipation was coursing through Harry's veins. Whether there had been anger and despair, there was now joy. This was it. Snape was late, but he had not betrayed Harry.

The rest of the street lamps of Privet Drive died consecutively until the street was pitch black. Harry thought he spotted the silhouette of a robed figure gliding across the lawn of the Dursley's house.

Seconds later, he heard a knock that was so loud it had to be aided by magic. It could hardly even be considered a knock. It was like a bomb exploding.

From the Dursley's room, Harry heard Vernon produce an inhuman noise. It sounded like a pig squealing in fright. Dudley let out a high pitch scream and Petunia shrieked as if a demon had arisen from hell in her bedroom.

Immediately, Harry heard the footsteps of the Dursleys bounding down the stairs.

Soon after, their front door burst open. Dudley screamed again. Petunia gasped so loudly, Harry wondered if it hurt her throat. Vernon roared unintelligibly. The cold, monotonous, venomous voice of Severus Snape followed their outbursts and silenced them all.

"Good evening," said Snape in a way that was hardly cordial. "I thought we'd reached an understanding last time. Evidently, I was wrong."

"Now, see here-" cried Vernon. He was cut off by the voice of another.

"That's quite enough," said Albus Dumbledore.

Harry felt a twinge of surprise and anger at the audacity of Dumbledore's appearance.

"Indeed," said Snape. "There is no need to attempt to defend your actions, Dursley. I very clearly told Mr. Potter to send me word that all was well when he returned here. I could imagine him failing to do so willingly, however, based on prior evidence, I am certain his failure was a result of your...inhumanity."

"How dare-"

"Where is he?" Snape demanded.

"Upstairs," said Dumbledore.

The conversation downstairs paused for an instant, and Harry heard the lock to his room click.

Harry ran to the door, wrenched it open, and practically flew downstairs. It was surreal to see Dumbledore and Snape standing face to face with the Dursleys at the threshold of their home once again.

"This will be your final warning, Dursley," said Snape dangerously. Harry smiled as Snape launched into a barrage of insults and threats, directed at the Dursleys.

And then Harry caught Dumbledore's eyes and he heard none of what Snape was saying.

Dumbledore was looking at Harry in a most curious manner. His face was stoic but his eyes were alive. Harry thought that Dumbledore suddenly looked a thousand years older. He looked as though he had lost a battle that he had been preparing his entire life

to fight. The light from his eyes was gone. He had been defeated. That defeat had taken a toll on him. It was as if he had just been robbed of that which was most precious to him. It was the dead look of a man that had no way out—no alternative. This, thought Harry, was the end of something for Albus Dumbledore. He understood that the Headmaster had failed at some great, important task. What that task was, or how Harry knew that Dumbledore had failed it, was unclear.

"Regrettably," finished Snape, "the Headmaster has decreed that Potter must remain here for the duration of the month. After such time, he will leave your home for the summer. Mark me, Dursley. If—"

"That's enough, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly, still looking at Harry.

"Headmaster" said Snape.

"Harry will be leaving the with us. He will be returning with us to Hogwarts, at least for tonight. He will remain with us until other arrangements can be made..."

Harry wasn't sure he'd heard Dumbledore right. Evidently, neither was Snape.

It was comical—the way Snape had already had his mouth open to speak. After Dumbledore had finished his statement, it took a moment for it to register in the mind of Snape. Then the potions master asked the question Harry wanted to ask: "What? After—"

"Enough, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly, but with an air of authority so unmistakable that even Dudley, who was far too stupid to notice such things, straightened up.

"Good!" cried Vernon, as soon as he his mind had processed Dumbledore's words (it took longer than anyone else's to do so). "Finally! A new dawn is rising, Petunia! I—"

"Silence," said Dumbledore so simply that it hardly seemed intimidating. Vernon, however, shrunk back, like an animal facing the barrel of a hunter's gun. "It saddens me," Dumbledore continued, "it is painful to know that it has come to this."

Harry blinked, not understanding Dumbledore at all.

"I say-" interjected Vernon.

"It sickens me," said Dumbledore a bit more loudly, cutting Vernon off, "that it has come to this. It is by your own hand that Harry is leaving this house tonight. You have all failed in the task I entrusted you with. You've treated Harry like a slave in your home. You ruined his childhood—a childhood that could have easily been joyous had you done as I asked and treated him as you would treat a child of your own." Dumbledore's gaze locked on Petunia. "You," he said, "I am most disappointed in. You understand this better than your husband does. There was no reason not to show Harry the compassion he deserved. Even if you were incapable of that, Harry wasn't a burden to you in any-"

"Now, see here!"

"Enough, Dursley," Snape hissed. "Do not dare try to imply that Potter was a burden to you. You make a strong, healthy income. If you would simply stop spoiling your own child with lavish gifts and copious amounts of food, you'd easily have the resources to treat Potter as if he was your own child. In fact, I'm sure you have them even with your current spending habits. Instead, you choose not to. You chose to treat him like an animal for no reason whatsoever."

"I resent that! I have perfectly good reason-"

"There really was no reason," said Dumbledore. "You imposed a reason—the fact that he was a wizard. But that is hardly a good reason. If his skin was a different color, would you have treated him the way you did?"

"That's-" Vernon stammered. "That's different!"

"How?" asked Snape.

"I..." Veron stuttered. "I..."

"Enough," said Dumbledore. "We will be leaving now."

Snape raised his wand. The Dursleys all flinched. Several loud pops issued in the silence from upstairs. Dumbledore gestured for Harry

to follow Snape as the potions master turned and stepped through the threshold of Number Four, Privet Drive and into the cool air of the summer night. Harry, without a moment's hesitation, followed Snape. He didn't turn back to look at the Dursleys, even as Dumbledore spoke to them.

"Good evening, Petunia—Vernon," said the Headmaster. "I certainly hope this is the last time we have to see one another. If I have to come here again, it will be bearing grim news. It will likely be your fault that I have to do so. You will have to live with what you have done. Good night."

XxX

The uncomfortable sensation of side-long Apparition hardly concerned Harry. When it ended, his heart nearly stopped because he realized he was standing inside the dark halls of Hogwarts again, in the corridor next to the gargoyle in the hollow that leapt aside when given the proper password and revealed the ascending spiral staircase to Dumbledore's office.

"Follow me, please," Dumbledore requested immediately. "We have a few matters to attend to."

"We certainly do," Snape agreed. He sounded annoyed.

Harry didn't say anything in fear that he might scream in joy. He was home.

"Chocolate toadstool," said Dumbledore to the gargoyle. Harry thought such a combination to be an odd password. Then he shrugged. Dumbledore was insane.

The gargoyle jumped out of the way to make way for a spiral staircase that slowly began to rise. Harry, Dumbledore, and Snape stepped on to it and rode it up to a door at the top of a secret tower.

Dumbledore opened the door to his office and stepped in. Harry and Snape followed him. They were greeted by the sounds of dozens of snoring portraits. Harry realized immediately that they were all feigning sleep. Obviously, Dumbledore and Snape had spoken about taking Harry from the Dursleys and the portraits had overheard. That was why they were all pretending to sleep. They

wanted to eavesdrop in secret. Harry thought that the front they presented was foolish. The portraits were a part of the office. If they wanted to listen to the business of the current Headmaster, no one could really stop them. Besides, this was probably not touchy information, and Harry was sure Dumbledore also knew the portraits were faking. Anyone would. Their purposeful snores were overly dramatic.

Dumbledore strode purposefully behind his desk and took a seat next to a large, golden rod upon which was perched the phoenix, Fawkes. Fawkes looked more vibrant and healthy than Harry remembered him. His head was buried beneath his wings.

Dumbledore gestured for Harry and Snape to each take a seat before his desk. At that moment, Fawkes lifted his head and stared straight at Harry. For a moment, the two locked eyes, and Harry was reminded of the look Dumbledore gave him back at the Dursleys. Somehow, Fawkes also appeared...disparaged.

"This is very important," Dumbledore began without preamble. "It is also very tragic."

Harry took his seat, surprised that Dumbledore had spoken before Harry had done so. It wasn't proper etiquette. Snape, evidently, preferred to stand. Harry thought he must be pacing behind him.

"I should like to say it is very important," Snape snapped. "I spent two hours attempting to—"

Dumbledore held up a hand, silencing Snape. He then directed his eyes toward Harry, gazing over the half-moon spectacles in a way that made him look like a very ancient teacher getting ready to launch in to a lesson he had no desire to teach.

"Allow me to give you the background, Harry. In short, Professor Snape informed me about the deal he'd made with you five hours ago, after you'd failed to send word. He gave you the most amount of time possible to do so. I agreed that his plan was solid, however, I saw the hole in it—namely, I thought you might purposefully neglect to send word to Professor Snape. Evidently, that isn't what happened. Professor Snape convinced me very early that we ought to come for you, however, he recommended that you be removed from the Dursley household, at least for the remainder of the

summer. I was opposed to this. You know my reasons. We argued for nearly two hours on the subject. In the end, Professor Snape agreed to my offer. You were to remain with the Dursleys for the duration of two more weeks, after which you could go to the house of a friend if you so desired. However, that plan will not longer be necessary..." Dumbledore paused to let his head droop down toward his desk, as if in defeat. "You see, Harry, when I arrived at the Dursleys, it became immediately evident to me that the protective magic surrounding them, their household, and you, had failed. It had vanished completely."

"What?" Snape demanded. "How is that possible?"

Dumbledore looked over Harry to where Snape was standing.

"It was complicated magic with very specific rules. If Harry could no longer call the Dursleys' house 'home', if he could no longer find sanctuary with his last living relatives, then the magic would become invalid and die."

Harry had expected Dumbledore to lecture him on the importance of returning to the Dursleys. Instead, Dumbledore had given him the best news he had received in a very long time. If the protection that the Dursleys provided was no longer valid, then there was no reason for him to return there. Ever.

Harry could hardly believe his hatred of that place had been his ticket out all along. All he really had to do was stop thinking of that place as his home, and stop thinking of the Dursleys as his relatives. He'd done that, and so the magic had died.

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "Predictable, as well. When I told Harry that he would have to return, I was worried that he might not consider that house 'home' anymore, but that didn't deter me from sending him back anyway. I was sure he still saw the Dursleys as his family, despite how much he appeared to despise them."

"How could you think that?" Harry demanded, unable to help himself. "After all they did."

"Wishful thinking, perhaps," Dumbledore replied. "Understand, Harry, that this presents a major problem. Lord Voldemort has recently resurfaced. As of this moment in time, it would appear that he has

been defeated yet again, but he is not dead. Of that much, I am certain. He may be biding his time until he happens upon another opportunity. I cannot predict when an opportunity will present itself to him. The incident with the Philosopher's Stone might have been foreseeable, but even I never expected him to return with the use of that diary. I can't predict how he will strike again, but I can say with great certainty that he will. As of now, the only protection you have from him rests with me, and people like me, as well as within the walls of Hogwarts. There is no place for you, outside of this school, that will ever be completely safe."

"Does that mean I never have to go back there again?"

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "No, Harry, you don't ever have to return to the Dursley household again unless you want to. You're missing the issue, I'm afraid. Now that your mother's protection over the house has died, you are far less safe than you were before. Luckily, one part of that magic still remains—the part imbued in you yourself. That will be your only protection."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"I'm afraid I'm not entirely sure," said Dumbledore. His face was pensive. "For now, we should leave the subject alone. I will consider it more thoroughly. Now, we must discuss your accommodations. For tonight, at least, you will remain here. Tomorrow and the rest of the summer is another matter. I realize that you will not willingly return to the Dursleys. You needn't return there at all, since the protection is no longer valid. Alas, you need somewhere to stay for the summer. Hogwarts is not the best place. It will be empty for long stretches of time... I understand you wished to stay at the Malfoys."

Dumbledore's gaze drifted up, above Harry, and locked with Snape's. They shared a look that Harry did not understand, and then Dumbledore returned his attention to where it had been before.

"That's still my plan," said Harry.

"I wish you would reconsider," said Dumbledore. "In light of the current state of the world..."

"I concur, Headmaster," said Snape. Harry spun in his chair to look at the potion's master who was standing with his arms crossed, an

unreadable look upon his face. "Malfoy Manor isn't the ideal place for you to spend the rest of your summer."

"I have to, though," said Harry. "I've nowhere else."

"I will not stop you from going, Harry," said Dumbledore. He looked to Snape again and nodded ever so slightly. "Alas, I fear you will come to regret this decision."

"How?" Harry demanded. "How could this possibly be bad?"

"There are things about Draco Malfoy and his parents that you do not understand," said Dumbledore cryptically.

"I understand enough," said Harry somewhat defensively.

"No," said Snape. "You do not."

"Well, if your decision is made, and you are certain about it, please go kindly to your common room. You will find a hot meal at your besides. Your owl, Hedwig, has been seen to, and your things are still packed in your trunk. Good night, Harry."

Dumbledore's parting statement sounded more like a command. Harry saw no need to say anything else—he'd gotten what he wanted.

He stood, nodded at Dumbledore, and strode past a grim-looking Snape out of the office. It annoyed Harry that Snape had agreed with Dumbledore about the Malfoys. After all, Harry had been under the impression that Snape was an old family friend of their's. What annoyed Harry more, however, was that he did not know why Snape had agreed.

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A few moments after the door shut behind Harry, Dumbledore locked grim eyes with Snape and spoke.

"I hope this is not a mistake," said Dumbledore.

"I doubt it," said Snape. "Potter will be in no real danger. Lucius had expressed interest in wanting to meet the boy."

"Naturally," said Dumbledore. "He is no longer loyal to Lord Voldemort. His loyalty might resurface some day, if Voldemort does as well, but for now, it is safe to assume that Lucius will not harm Harry. If I had an inkling that he would, I would insist that Harry find another friend immediately."

"I know."

"Lucius, like many other Death Eaters, harbors a certain curiosity about Harry."

"Indeed. They all have an irrational idea that Potter is the second-coming of the Dark Lord."

"Lucius may attempt to sway Harry's sympathies," remarked Dumbledore.

"My thoughts as well," said Snape.

"I have observed the boy. From what I understand of him, such tactics will have the opposite effect. If Lucius tries to sway Harry's sympathies, he may succeed only insofar as nurturing Harry's... distaste for Muggles. He will hit a dead end if he dares to touch or allude to Lord Voldemort. It will backfire on him."

"Yes," said Snape. "Although, Lucius isn't foolish enough to go that far. He will wait until Potter is older before he tries such a thing."

"Indeed. The most pressing matter is Bellatrix Lestrange. She is Narcissa Malfoy's sister. Their sympathies may lie with her. That would be very dangerous for Harry."

"Not a possibility," said Snape. "Lucius is too much of a coward. Narcissa might be sympathetic, but he will overrule her. They will not be associated with Bellatrix. It would undermine Lucius's standing in the Ministry if such activity was ever discovered—not only that, but it would guarantee him a cell in Azkaban. Lucius will not take that chance with Bellatrix."

"Agreed," said Dumbledore. "Still, Severus, I worry about what ideas might be planted in Harry's mind during his stay at the Malfoys. I must ask you to keep an eye on him for me."

"I will do so, of course, Headmaster," said Snape.

"Thank you, Severus."

"Naturally," said Snape. "Potter is, after all, his mother's son."

A/N: I reasoned that, since Voldy used Harry's blood to return in GOF, and the protection over the Dursley House didn't die until DH, obviously the two weren't related. I'm not sure if it ever says that specifically in canon, but that was my assumption. Therefore, I think it's safe to say that, since the protection at the Dursleys is invalid, the protection over Harry's person is still good.

Chapter 37: Lucius Malfoy

Mr. Becraft was a relatively simple man in terms of appearance. In terms of intellectual capacity, he was a far more complex individual. He had a doctorates degree in philosophy, obtained from a prestigious university in England. He knew things that the people walking down the streets of London around him didn't know. His adopted theory of metaphysics was sound, his epistemology, like all epistemology, was merely an opinion, but he was confident enough to be sure that his opinion was better than anyone else's. He was one of the few people in the world that could observe the luxury of ethics because his mind was honed and civilized. And, he was, of course, an advocate of the best political system in existence.

He wondered, as he walked the streets in London on his way to the airport to catch a flight to America so that he could give a presentation at the prestigious Harvard University, whether or not what he was seeing was actually real; or if it was only a figment of his imagination. The subject of the presentation he was leaving London to give was about his outspoken theory on other dimensions. Mr. Becraft believed that anything at all was possible. He believed that supernatural events had certain causes; that they were the product of a temporary rip or cut in some undefined barrier that momentarily connected this dimension with another dimension. The lecture he intended to give at Harvard was on his theory of what would happen if other dimensions (and he had no idea how many there were) collided and "fused" permanently with this dimension. It was a mildly popular lecture that he'd given several times at several well-established institutions.

Mr. Becraft thought that an explosion of a catastrophic nature would occur if such a collision between dimensions was to occur, and whatever survived the explosion, be it humans or other entities, would then gradually adapt to fit the new laws and circumstances the new dimension. The change would be abrupt and startling, of course, and it would harm or destroy many entities, especially humans. But, in time, things would evolve to fit within the new constraints of the new reality. Mr. Becraft envisioned that such a thing would be beautiful, if it was even possible. He had doubts about the possibility, however. The only real reason he adhered to his philosophical beliefs was because the press liked to comment on them (and a lot of the comments were negative), and the universities liked to book him for lectures. He, of course, had no idea what to

believe. The only real concept he understood in terms of philosophy was the primacy of consciousness. Despite his doctorate degree, everything else seemed arbitrary and useless to him. He wasn't sure he believed the entire primacy of consciousness theory, but he compromised and made it a part of his own muddled philosophy which he called Universal Subjectivism—a term which literally meant nothing.

Mr. Becraft didn't care about the integrity of his philosophy, of course. He didn't often consider his degree, either. He didn't like to think about whether or not he was qualified to possess it.

Really, Mr. Becraft was only concerned with his finances.

Mr. Becraft stumbled as he collided with someone on the streets. In an instant, he realized it was a woman. In another instant, he realized that she was a rather plain woman with a forgetful face. Her features weren't profound or memorable. In fact, Mr. Becraft had a strange feeling that if he were to look away from her, he would forget her in an instant. This caught his attention, because it seemed to contrast the initial "vibe" he'd received from the woman. By all appearances, she was to be forgotten. This, somehow, seemed to make her more memorable. It was a contradiction that Mr. Becraft simply could not ignore.

"Dear me, madam!" he cried. "I'm terribly sorry! I didn't see you."

The woman giggled. "It's okay, my dear, no harm done. My, my, does your face look familiar."

Mr. Becraft was shocked. "Why—it does? Yes, perhaps it might. My name is Doctor Richard Becraft. I am a rather distinguished philosopher."

The woman frowned. "Are you? I didn't know your kind were able to be distinguished! Ah, yes! That's where I saw your face. In the Muggle paper. I read the article."

"The... what paper, madam...?"

"The Muggle rag. I've been studying the Muggles a bit, now that I'm free. I'm looking for someone. Our own papers, you see, aren't being specific enough. Sometimes, the best way to find somebody you're

looking for is to search in the papers of Muggles. It's hard to explain, but I'll water it down for you. Your kind are stupid, so you print everything—even things you don't understand. My kind is smarter, we hide important clues..."

"Madam, what are you talking about? Muggles? What are Muggles?"

"Your kind, Doctor Becraft."

"Philosophers?"

"Probably. If you call your articles philosophy, then I'm sure many Muggles could be philosophers."

"Why, everyone is a philosopher, madam! I, however, have studied the subject a bit more thoroughly. Tell me, why is it best to look in the papers of philosophers if you are trying to find someone?"

"Because we are above you. You're too ignorant to notice. You don't know what you're printing."

"I say! I am quite offended, madam!"

"Don't be. I read your articles and your insane theories on other dimensions. There are two dimensions, Doctor. Yours and mine. They've been colliding for years! And would you like to know a secret? Your theory is foolish, Muggle stupidity! YOU'VE NEVER ADAPTED YOU FILTHY, REEKING ANIMAL! AVADA KEDAVRA!"

An explosion of brilliant green light, accompanied by a deafening boom and the screams of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people was the last thing Doctor Richard Becraft was aware of before he left this dimension—this world. The explosion, contrary to what he had theorized, wasn't beautiful at all.

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**FEAR STRIKES MUGGLE AND WIZARD LONDON ALIKE!
EXPLOSIONS IN THE MUGGLE STREETS!**

By Prophet Staff Writer

Rita Skeeter

Terror is gripping the streets of London! Yesterday, at approximately nine o'clock in the morning, an explosion destroyed a row of several Muggle businesses lining an, as of now, unrevealed street. Several Muggles were killed, and a fire that could not be extinguished by Muggle means blazed for nearly three hours before Ministry Officials arrived on the scene. An Auror who was present on the scene and wishes to keep his name secret at this time spoke unofficially for the Ministry. It is clear that the source of this fire and the explosions of a magical nature—decidedly Dark Magic.

The slightly singed remains of distinguished Muggle philosopher, Doctor Richard Becraft, were found in the streets. After a short round of tests, it was determined he was killed by the Avada Kedavra curse. Living witnesses to the murder and the explosion were interviewed prior to being Obliviated. Most of them had stories to corroborate the theory.

They claimed to see a unremarkable woman approach the philosopher and stop him to chat for a few moments. The chat apparently turned into a very conspicuous argument before the woman pulled out what the Muggles describe as "a small stick-like weapon". According a witness, the woman then "shouted some words that sounded vaguely like Latin to me, and all of a sudden there was this flash of green light and Becraft simply dropped dead... It was horrible! Afterwards... the woman wasn't there anymore. She... changed. Her appearance, I mean- it changed, you know? I couldn't see very well, all I know was she had brown hair before she killed Becraft—then it somehow became black!" The witnesses' memories were wiped after the incident. Among the Muggles, this event is now thought to be "act of terrorism".

Ministry Officials believe this to be an isolated attack perpetrated by Bellatrix Lestrange and possibly Sirius Black, both escaped inmates of Azkaban Prison that still remain at large. Officials believe Lestrange and Black are toying with them, attacking Muggles and wrecking havoc on the streets of London, the very city in which the Ministry of Magic resides, in order to humiliate the Ministry.

Officials say they are following several leads on the whereabouts of Black and Lestrange, and the Minister is expected to hold a press

conference later today or early tomorrow. Keep reading the Daily Prophet for all the latest news.

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It was nearly noon on a rather gloomy Friday when Lucius Malfoy received an owl. He was, of course, surprised to see the name of the letter's sender, etched in Albus Dumbledore's odd, looping scrawl, on the envelope. Most letters that Lucius Malfoy received involved Ministry business, some of which involved the Hogwarts Headmaster. Lucius had never directly been a recipient of any letter from Albus Dumbledore, however. This and the fact that Lucius had no idea why the Hogwarts Headmaster would even consider sending him a letter, piqued Lucius' interest.

Lucius tore open the envelope and pulled out a piece of Hogwart's stationary. The words written across the fine piece of parchment conveyed a most unusual request. Dumbledore explained, offering almost no detail apart from what was absolutely necessary, that Harry Potter was in need of a place to stay for the duration of the summer holiday. Lucius remembered very clearly that Draco had asked him if Potter could be allowed to stay at Malfoy Manor for the last month or so of the holiday. Lucius had said that Potter could if he so desired, but he had been under the impression that Dumbledore had insisted that Potter remain with his Muggle relatives for a least a month during the summer holiday.

It had been roughly five days.

Naturally, Lucius responded to Dumbledore's request. He wrote back, the words of his letter conveying polite acceptance; that Harry was welcome to remain at Malfoy Manor for the duration of the summer. After sending the return owl, Lucius decided he would not inform his son or wife of the news. He spent the next two hours pacing around his study, neglecting to go and do the work that needed to be done at the Ministry, pondering questions. There were many questions to consider, but three stood out as the chief questions in Lucius' mind:

First, why had Dumbledore given in, and allowed Potter to leave the residence of his filthy Muggle relatives? From what information Lucius had gleaned from his son, he understood the Dursleys were far more rotten than the common Muggle. Their capacity for cruelty

was seemingly unlimited, and it appeared that they despised their wizard nephew with every drop of dirty blood in their reeking, primitive bodies.

"And why shouldn't they fear him?" thought Lucius. After all, Potter was their better. He was one of the most mysterious young wizards on the planet. He had, after all, been directly responsible for the downfall of the Dark Lord. Lucius was sure that the Dursleys were too simple-minded to understand the implications of such things, but he was also sure that they were right to fear Potter.

In any case, Dumbledore had insisted that Potter remain with the Muggles for a specific amount of time. There must be a good reason for that, thought Lucius.

It was Lucius' goal and objective to look as though he thought Dumbledore was a senile, old fool, and, by such methods, he had convinced many other people that Dumbledore was, indeed, a senile, old fool. Lucius, however, wasn't that stupid. He knew that, as odd and quirky and wrong the Headmaster was, he was anything but a fool. If Dumbledore insisted that Potter stay with his relatives, especially considering certain evidence about the quality of the care they provided Potter with, then Dumbledore must have a good reason. Lucius wanted to know what that reason was very much. The thought of possessing such information was enticing.

Secondly, Lucius was curious to meet the boy himself. After all, Harry Potter had destroyed his former master. Lucius' memory the aftermath of the Dark Lord's downfall was muddled. There was a kind of three-way schism among the Death Eaters after the Dark Lord fell. Some of the Death Eaters, such as Bellatrix Lestrange, insisted that any sort of demise of the Dark Lord was impossible. They seemed intent on ignoring reality—they seemed to believe he was still alive. Lucius did not know if they had any evidence to support their belief or not, but he hadn't come across any himself, and they had presented none, so he did not join them.

Some other Death Eaters believed a Dark Magic, the likes of which the world had never seen, must rest in Harry Potter. There was no other explanation for Potter's defeat of Lord Voldemort. What was most chilling about the entire ordeal was that Potter was little more than a baby. Those Death Eaters that believed Potter possessed a Dark Magic wished to find him, to steal him, to study him. They

acted as though the boy was to be treated as an experiment. Lucius did not join them either, but he was intrigued by their theory.

The remaining Death Eaters—those who didn't follow Bellatrix into madness, or believe in the Dark Magic imbued in Harry Potter—ran for their lives and their freedom. Many of them were taken to Azkaban and given life sentences. Lucius was one of the lucky ones. He avoided Azkaban entirely and managed to remain in good standing with the Ministry of Magic. There were many witches and wizards that did not sympathize with Voldemort's and the Death Eater's views on Muggles and Wizardkind, and they were naturally resentful and suspicious of Lucius. None of that mattered, of course, since the Ministry was not.

Lucius was curious to meet Harry Potter because of the theory that the boy was imbued with some kind of secret, unknown, Dark Magic. The idea that that was what had defeated the greatest Dark Wizard of all time was fascinating to Lucius.

The third question Lucius had was the most important. Why would Dumbledore allow Potter to be placed in his, Lucius Malfoy's, hands? Dumbledore held no illusions about Lucius. The old man knew that Lucius had been a Death Eater, and he knew that he hadn't reformed. Why, then, would Dumbledore allow Harry Potter to stay at Malfoy Manor?

Two hours later, Lucius received word from the Headmaster. Harry Potter would be arriving tomorrow at eleven o'clock in the morning. Now that it was confirmed, Lucius informed Narcissa and Draco.

Draco was, naturally, happy and excited to hear that his friend would be spending the rest of the summer with them. Narcissa only looked at Lucius quizzically. They waited until their son was in bed to discuss what had to be discussed. Lucius raised his points in the discussion about Potter with his wife. Narcissa had formulated questions that dealt with discovering the answers that Lucius himself was also seeking. That was why he loved the woman. They were so alike.

Lucius went to bed that night happy and slightly invigorated by the thought that, tomorrow, his study of the Boy Who Lived could begin.

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Harry Potter's arrival at Malfoy Manor seemed anti-climactic to Lucius. The boy was escorted by Severus Snape who stood on the porch of the Manor while Draco led Harry inside and showed him his room. After exchanging pleasantries, Lucius subtly dismissed Narcissa. She disappeared into the house, no doubt content that she would hear whatever Snape said later through the lips of her husband.

"As of now, Professor Dumbledore is entering a series of judicial proceedings with the Ministry of Magic," said Snape. "It is my duty to inform you that, until such time as a legal guardian has been designated for Harry Potter in the absence of his Muggle relatives, the Headmaster has legal custody of Potter."

"Interesting," remarked Lucius. "Continue, Severus. I think I can see where this is going."

"I was told to inform you that it may take the duration of the summer holiday to designate a legal guardian for Potter. Professor Dumbledore has not deferred any part of his guardianship to your or your wife. He was merely made an amendment to allow-

"I am familiar with the terms, Severus," remarked Lucius. "I helped create them."

"Indeed," said Snape. His voice was too monotonous to be anything but contemptuous. This made Lucius smile. "Very well. Dumbledore told me to humor you. I've been ordered to play your game."

"What game, Severus?"

"Politics. I was told to use my considerable skill in negotiations to convey a message to you."

Lucius laughed humorlessly. "But, Severus, surely it is clear to both you and Professor Dumbledore that this isn't a political setting."

"Your life is permanently grounded in a political setting, Lucius."

"Is it, Severus?" said Lucius with a vile, mocking smile. "In what way?"

"The obvious lie that everyone ignores because you play a delicate game of keeping your hands clean and asserting your more... disturbing influence through others."

"A puppet master?" said Lucius.

"If you wish to call it that."

"Ah. A much more useful occupation than a potions master, I dare say."

Lucius smiled and laughed as though the insult was a jest. Snape knew it wasn't. He understood the contempt that Lucius felt for him, and he reciprocated it. Both men were aware that the present conversation they were having was precarious. As of now, they were on different sides of a clearly defined spectrum. Before, they had been friends. At the moment, they were enemies. Both of them understood that, and even Lucius wasn't cowardly enough to back down.

"Perhaps," said Snape simply.

"In any case," Lucius continued, "we both agree that this isn't a political setting, and we both know everything we need to know about one another. I suggest we drop the pretense."

"So, you wish for me to give to the Headmaster's message bluntly?"

"Oh, yes," said Lucius. "Amuse me."

"Very well. Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange have escaped Azkaban. Bellatrix is still loyal to our master—"

"Former master," said Lucius.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Former?"

"Of course. Past is past, Severus. The Dark Lord is gone, as far as everyone knows. My sister-in-law is a fanatic—an extremist. I hardly care that she is still loyal. As for Black... well... where he places his loyalties remains a mystery, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," said Snape. "You have just told me all I needed to know."

"And I already know what you want to tell me, Severus," said Lucius. "No harm will come to Potter in my household. It will not come by my hand, my wife's, my sister-in-law's, or Black's. I am fully capable of protecting the boy."

"Of course," said Snape. "Nevertheless, I will visit periodically to check on Potter."

"At Dumbledore's orders, of course?"

"Naturally," said Snape.

Lucius shook his head. "It's funny, Severus. Back then, you were a mystery to me, and you still are today. I wonder, where do your loyalties lie? I believe you, like Bellatrix, are a fanatic. But a fanatic of a different sort—a silent, meticulous, secret fanatic. A danger to both sides of any issue. I wish I could place what side you truly sympathize with, Severus. I really wish I could. After our conversation about Harry Potter... if I didn't know better, I would say theirs."

"I needn't explain my rationale to you, Lucius. I have very good reasons for doing what I do."

"Of course," said Lucius. "Well, I believe we understand each other perfectly."

"I believe so," Snape concurred. "One last thing."

"Yes, of course. What is it?"

"How much do you know about Sirius Black's relationship to Harry Potter?"

Lucius smiled. "Enough."

"You are not to breathe a word of it to Potter."

Lucius chuckled. "Now, Severus, why on earth would I want to play that card? I could hardly predict what ramifications would come."

"Excellent," said Snape. "It would seem we understand one another perfectly."

"It would seem so. Good day, Severus."

"Good day."

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After a particularly nasty experience of side-along Apparition with Snape, Harry had found himself staring at the broad, iron gates of the biggest house he had ever seen. In fact, he hesitated to call it a house. It was too large to be a house, and, based on Harry's standards, it was even too big to be called a mansion.

Its name was Malfoy Manor. Its exterior was dark, faintly resembling an old type of Muggle architecture whose name Harry did not know. Yet, it wasn't Muggle architecture. It was distinctly the product of wizard design. It was an imposing structure that threatened to swallow all those that entered—a testament, Harry thought, to the power of the Malfoys. Specifically, the power of their patriarch.

Snape led Harry across the lawn, down the long drive. Gravel crunched beneath their feet as they made their way toward the manner. Harry noted that the hedges on either side of the driveway were trimmed too perfectly. He was surprised and faintly amused by the sight of pure white peacocks, strutting across the lawn like they were the sovereigns of some surrounding kingdom.

At the door, Snape knocked. It seemed like only a split second later that the door was pulled open by a tall man, clad in black robes. His hair was pure white, and it hung at his shoulders in a simplistically elegant style. In his right hand, he held a walking stick. Its top ornament was pure, faultless silver that gleamed brilliantly, despite the lack of any real source of light. It was shaped like the head of a serpent, ready to strike. Harry thought it must have cost the man a small fortune.

"Good morning, Mr Potter," said the man. "I am Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father."

Lucius extended his free hand. Harry took it with a firm grip. They shook and broke contact.

"Good morning," Harry returned. "Thank you for allowing me to come."

Lucius smiled. It was a smile that Harry was sure was intended to appear warm and welcoming. Oddly enough, it didn't convey such feelings. To Harry, it looked amused, perhaps contemptuously amused. It seemed vaguely mocking and condescending, as though the elder Malfoy was attempting to make his superiority evident. Superiority over what, Harry did not know.

"It's no trouble," said Lucius assuringly. "We are glad to have you as a guest in our house."

Lucius stepped gracefully out of-and away from-the threshold. He gestured for Harry to enter. Harry looked at Snape.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"Indeed," said Snape.

It was an exchange of two words that said much more. Harry was thanking Snape for staying true to his word, for rescuing him from the living hell that was the Dursley household. He was also, more superficially, thanking Snape for bringing him here, to Malfoy Manor. Snape was acknowledging and accepting Harry's thanks with his one, monotonous response. His single word said all that needed to be said.

"Draco is waiting for you inside," said Lucius. "Please, step in."

"Thank you," said Harry politely. Without another word to Snape or Lucius, he stepped into the foyer of Malfoy Manor. He found Draco leaning against the threshold of a doorway to the left, arms crossed. The entrance door of Malfoy Manor closed quietly behind Harry, cutting off the voices of Lucius and Severus and casting a conspicuous silence upon the foyer. Harry assumed that it was charmed.

"Morning, Potter," said Draco.

"Morning, Draco," said Harry.

Draco smiled. "Good to have you here, Potter. Welcome to your summer home- away from the filth of the Muggles."

Harry reciprocated both Draco's attitude and his smile. "Good to be here," said Harry.

"Your things came this morning," said Draco. "Snape or Dumbledore magicked them into the guest room."

"Cool," said Harry. And then the conversation awkwardly paused as such conversations often do. Harry hadn't had any friends before he came to Hogwarts, so he'd never gone to spend time with any of his Muggle peers (though it disgusted him to use the adjective "Muggle" to describe a "peer", especially if that peer was associated with him). He had, on occasion, accompanied the Dursleys to the house of one of Vernon's friends, but only when such a friend insisted that Vernon bring everyone that lived in his house. Such requests were seldom made; Harry could count the instances on one hand. Vernon usually hated the people that made them because he had a terrible habit of projecting his mistakes on other people.

Still, Harry had been invited, as a guest, to the houses of other people a few times. Every time, the opening conversation had been awkward and relatively empty. In those cases, it was because Harry had been afraid the Dursleys would punish him if he said anything that they deemed to be "wrong" about their friend's house. He usually kept his mouth shut unless the asker insisted he answer. Three out of the four times that this happened, the Dursley's had punished him for his response. The thought of it made his blood boil.

This awkwardness between Draco and Harry, however, was borne of another reason. Everything just seemed so surreal to Harry. Last summer, he could never have even begun to imagine that, in just a year, he would be living in the sanctuary that was Malfoy Manor. A private, luxurious, comfortable residence, hidden far away from Muggle society.

"Potter," said Draco sharply, as though he was trying to get Harry's attention.

"Yeah?" said Harry.

"Merlin, you are deaf."

"Oh, sorry," said Harry distractedly. "I wasn't paying attention."

"I know. It's become a cliché with you, Potter. Whenever you're thinking about... something, you never hear me say your name."

"Sorry," said Harry.

"Yes," said Draco, a bit indignantly. "What are you thinking about this time? You didn't actually tell me last time."

Harry paused for a moment when the meaning of what Draco was asking him registered in his mind. By last time, Draco meant some incident where he'd asked Harry about the Chamber of Secrets. Harry, of course, had been alone in his quest to end the threat that the Chamber posed to Hogwarts. He'd pushed Draco away, and Draco was still bitter about it. Harry understood. He'd known what he was doing. He'd thought that Draco would've hindered his progress, but, in retrospect, his "progress" and nearly led to his death. His entrance to the Chamber had been ill-planned and sloppy. It had very nearly resulted in both his and Neville Longbottom's death. Harry thought that, for the first time, he might have been wrong about Draco—about his friends in general.

As a child, he remembered watching Dudley with his friends. He remembered his desire to be accepted, back before he actually understood the reason he was so ostracized. In Draco and in Blaise, he'd gained friends, but, to Harry, it had always seemed superficial. Even though they'd been through the ordeal with the Philosopher's Stone together, he had never really related to Draco. Other than the fact that they were both in Slytherin and they both detested Muggles, Harry wasn't sure that he and Draco really had much in common. He realized he had never really taken the effort to become friendly with Draco.

He had all summer to make amends.

"I'm thinking about your house," said Harry truthfully, in response to Draco's question. "I can't believe I'm here."

"Me neither," said Draco. "Your plan worked."

"I knew it would," said Harry. "I haven't felt this good since I found out that Hogwarts existed."

Draco smiled. "Getting out of the Muggle world..." He trailed off. The words he did not say were far more revealing than the words he did say, and Harry completely agreed.

Leaving the Muggle world was like emerging from the primordial muck of the lowest habitat of existence. Entering the Wizarding World made the filthy remnants of that primitive, evil world vanish as if they had never before existed. It was like coming home.

That's where Harry was, he thought: home. Malfoy Manor, in the short time he'd been within its walls, had become his second home. His home away from home.

"Let me show you around," Draco invited.

"All right," said Harry.

For the first time, he felt like he might not have look so desperately forward to returning to Hogwarts.

Chapter 38: Draco Malfoy

The first thing Harry was shown was his new room. Draco led him up a beautiful, albeit dim staircase to a wide, long hall with very intricate floor paneling. Harry could see the Malfoy Crest in the middle of select tiles. Doors made of dark, finely carved, and finely polished wood lined either wall. Portraits of deceased family members adorned the spaces between them. Candles whose wax didn't seem to melt lit the portraits, standing on protruding, pure silver holders on either side of each portrait. A chandelier that had been forged from silver and appeared to be dripping with emeralds hung in the center of the hall, providing a localized glow of bright light that glittered off the surfaces of all the portrait frames and candle holders. It gave the entire hallway an elegant, mystical appearance. The color scheme, thought Harry, was richly Slytherin.

Draco led him down the hallway to the last door on the left.

"My room," said Draco, "is here." He indicated the door on the right.

A large window occupied the end wall between the two doors. Looking outside, Harry could see the albino peacocks strutting about the grounds.

"This is your room," said Draco. He grabbed the silver handle, inset with a serpent's head. A tiny emerald glinted in the snake's eye socket. Draco turned the handle, twisting the neck of the snake, an effect that Harry found rather bizarre and strangely clever at the same time.

Draco pushed open the door, and gestured into a room as large as the Dursley's den. Inside stood a beautiful wardrobe made of some exotic wood whose name Harry did not know. Carved serpent heads supported it, and its handles were, of course, silver. The carpet was luxurious and black. A wide window looked out upon the midday grounds of the Manor. The bed was bigger than any bed Harry had ever seen before, and its covers were a velvety, dark green material that looked impossibly soft and comfortable. Harry's trunk stood at the foot of it. Hedwig sat sleeping in her cage.

"Sorry, it's a bit plain," said Draco. "Only a wardrobe and all. Short notice."

"It's brilliant," said Harry. "Really brilliant."

Draco shrugged. "If you say so. Glad you like it. Come on, then. There's more to see."

Draco then proceeded to give Harry a proper tour of all of Malfoy Manor. Harry noticed, as Draco led him back down the main hallway of the second level that at least two corollary hallways branched off from it, making the manor seem impossibly big to Harry since one hallway led to an entirely separate wing lined with all sorts of rooms. Several of them housed various treasures and trophies of the Malfoy estate. The other hall led to at least three different bathrooms (and there were at least two more on the third level and three on the first). One bathroom, at the end of that particular corridor, was the largest that Harry had ever seen in his entire life. It was so large that Harry thought he'd feel embarrassed to use it. It seemed too wide and exposed. It housed a bath larger than a pool and the most elegant and wonderful shower Harry had ever seen. It had seven heads, each of them shaped like a serpent ready to strike.

The den of Malfoy Manor was spacious and its fireplace was indescribably elegant. Its mantle was so simple that it contradicted the ornate, serpentine theme of the rest of the Manor's various ornaments. Yet, somehow, even more than the chandelier in the dining room (which was like the chandelier in the hall upstairs, only a hundred times bigger, and overflowing with chains of emeralds so that it resembled a very expensive weeping willow tree), it seemed to be the most exquisitely elegant thing in the house.

The kitchen was large and stocked with every sort of ingredients imaginable, including several that Harry had never heard of before. He was sure they must be magical. The wine cellar of Malfoy Manor, in contrast to the rest of the house, was cold, dim, dark, and gray. Its entrance was barred, making it feel like a dungeon to Harry. It was the one place he did not like.

That night, Narcissa Malfoy, the matriarch of the house, called Harry, Draco, and Lucius to dinner. Harry sat down on one side of the Malfoy's spacious, black dining table next to Draco. Lucius Malfoy sat across from Harry, and Narcissa across from Draco. The table extended a long way down to the left, past Draco and Narcissa. Harry thought it could easily seat the entire Slytherin House.

"I'm sure the filthy animals haven't provided much in the way of good food," said Narcissa as soon as they sat down. "Not to worry, Mr. Potter—you will acquire a taste for the best this summer." She smiled in a way that made Harry's skin crawl. It reminded him of Bellatrix Lestrange, though they, Narcissa and Bellatrix, didn't look all that much alike.

"Indeed," said Lucius. He clapped his hands twice.

Two large, silver platters instantly appeared on the table, followed by two lit candles in serpentine holders on either side. The platters held the finest cuts of steak Harry had ever seen. Next, several more platters appeared holding side dishes. Harry eyed the baked potatoes and the exotic looking salad. His stomach rumbled audibly, but no one seemed to hear it.

The Malfoys then began to take a helping of food. Harry followed suit, and they began to eat in silence.

It was then that Harry noticed that nothing to drink had appeared.

"Excuse me," said Harry to no one in particular.

"One moment, Mr. Potter," said Lucius Malfoy, holding up a hand. "It isn't supposed to take them this long. I intended to be lenient..."

"What does he mean?" Harry whispered to Draco as Lucius drew his wand.

"Watch," said Draco simply.

"Where are my drinks?" Lucius called, looking up at the beautiful chandelier. "Come to me. Now."

Harry jumped at the sound of two loud pops.

He caught the sensation of a motion in his peripheral vision and turned to see two house elves standing timidly next to the dining room table. One was quivering. Its skin was flushed at the cheeks, and chalk pale everywhere else. Its ears were thin and filmy, as if to say that this elf had no substance in physicality, and none in character. Its eyes added to the aura of uselessness. They were watery, tired, and frightened. Its tiny hands were drawn up to its

chest, positioned impotently like broken weapons, unable to protect the wielder. This house elf wore what appeared to be an old flower bag.

The house elf standing next to the one wearing the flower bag was a house elf that Harry had met before. It was Dobby. However, Dobby's appearance was different. His dirty pillowcase was now stained with what was obviously dried blood, his bald head was scarred with mostly-healed lacerations, and his large, bat like ears were missing chunks around the edges—almost as if they'd been shredded. Dobby's head was held down, as if in defeat.

Harry, strangely, felt nothing at the sight of the elf. No anger, no hatred—nothing. What Dobby had done to him was over now, and it was obvious that Dobby had been punished.

"Tiffany," Lucius snapped, addressing the elf that was not Dobby.

Tiffany looked up, positively convulsing in terror now. "Y-Yes, M-Master Malfoy?"

"The wine?"

"S-Sorry, M-Master. Tiffany thought that D-D-Dobb... D-Dobby-"

"Dobby," barked Lucius. Tiffany shut up and convulsed some more, but her convulsions seemed to be borne of relief now, not terror.

"Dobby has no excuse, sir," said Dobby.

"Right you are," said Lucius coldly. "Look there, Dobby. Look at our guest."

Lucius gestured toward Harry.

Dobby lifted his head and turned his watery-eyed gaze toward Harry. They locked eyes for a moment, and Dobby's ears drooped.

"Harry Potter must understand that Dobby was only-"

"Silence" Lucius hissed, cutting off the house elf. The other, Tiffany, squeaked and began to sob quietly into the flower bag she wore.

Lucius turned to Harry. "I'm sorry for neglecting to do so sooner, but I must apologize for the behavior of my servant."

Harry shrugged. "It looks like you punished him well enough."

"Oh, yes," said Lucius. With a sneer, he looked back at Dobby. "Go beat some sense into your head, elf—but be quiet about it and don't break anything expensive. I want to see your attempt at bruises worthy enough to serve as punishment for you. You will never meet my standards, but you must come close. If I do not feel that you tried hard enough, I will punish you instead."

Dobby sighed in defeat and looked down at the floor.

"Go!" Lucius ordered.

Dobby lifted his hand dejectedly, snapped his tiny fingers, and vanished.

"As for you, Tiffany," said Lucius, "bring me wine from the cellar immediately. Go iron your hands afterward."

"Y-Yes, M-M-Master," Tiffany stuttered through her pitiful little sniffles. Then, she, like Dobby, snapped her fingers and vanished.

"I'm terribly sorry about what Dobby did," said Lucius. "We would have killed him if house elves weren't becoming so ridiculously expensive. Instead, I decided to let him live out his useless, miserable life in the fashion he deserves."

"Good," said Harry, unable to find any other word to say. He didn't feel good about Dobby's punishment. He felt nothing. The elf was a fool. Dobby had had good intentions, but he had been a factor that had contributed to the Dursley's terrible abuse of Harry last summer.

"Speaking of my servant's mistakes..." said Lucius with a rather conniving half-grin, "what is it like to live with Muggles?"

"What?" said Harry.

"Lucius," hissed Narcissa. "Please, Harry, forgive my husband. If you do not wish to speak of it, we will understand. Muggles are filthy,

rotten creatures. I understand how you must feel about them. It makes me positively sick."

"Thanks, Mrs. Malfoy," said Harry.

"Oh, my dear wife is quite correct," said Lucius. "It is not my intention to force you to divulge anything on such a terribly unpleasant subject."

"It's all right," said Harry. "Living with the Dursleys is like living in hell."

Speaking that one statement was all that was necessary. Lucius Malfoy would never understand its fullest implications. Lord Voldemort was the source of Harry's misery. If not for him, then Harry's parents would not have died, and if not for their death, he would never have gone to live with the Dursleys. Harry hated his Muggle relatives. He despised the Dark Lord. These feelings were rooted so deeply that Harry knew they would always be there. That one statement defined everything clearly. Harry's life with Muggles, for the most part, had been hell—all because of Lord Voldemort.

"I'd imagine so," said Lucius. "What a terrible tragedy..."

He trailed off. Harry wasn't sure to which tragedy Lucius was referring, but he didn't ask.

"Tell me this, Mr. Potter," said Lucius, "how are your grades in school?"

"The same as Draco's," said Harry.

Draco smiled.

"Very good," said Lucius appraisingly. "Near the top of your class, of course. I should've suspected. You have an aura about you, Mr. Potter."

"A what?"

Lucius smiled this time. "I feel that you have great potential, my boy. Great potential." Harry thought wildly that Lucius was speaking

about his 'defeat' of Lord Voldemort. But Lucius never said anything like that, and Harry had no idea where the thought came from.

Lucius quizzed him for the duration of the meal, asking all manner of questions. Some of them seemed to be subtle attempts to gain insight to Harry, but Harry didn't offer much. Harry remembered meeting Lucius and Draco Malfoy on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters right before his first year. It had been Draco that had showed him how to pass through the barrier. Harry wasn't sure he'd liked Draco then, and he wasn't sure he'd liked Lucius either.

Now, Harry was beginning to think that Lucius Malfoy had a purpose. Harry didn't know what that purpose was, but it seemed strange to him. Lucius was trying to discover something. Harry thought of Dumbledore's warnings against going to the Malfoy's house for the summer. At the time, Harry thought that the Headmaster had meant Bellatrix Lestrange or Sirius Black. Now, he wondered if he was wrong.

Harry was glad when dinner ended, and Lucius stopped asking him questions.

Harry and Draco retreated to Harry's room upstairs where they set up a game of Wizard's Chess on a table Draco brought from his room. They talked about everything and nothing and played the game for several hours. Harry lost count of how many times Draco bested him. Harry couldn't believe how rotten he was at Wizard's Chess. He hadn't played in a very long time.

"Draco," said Harry suddenly, "what is it that your dad wants?"

"What do you mean?" Draco asked, clearly not expecting Harry to ask such a question.

"I don't know," said Harry. "What were all those questions about?"

Draco shrugged. "Father gets to know people," he said. "That's how he made his fortunes. Know the right people, pull the right strings. It's an art form. I guess he is trying to understand you because he finds you interesting. You should take it as a compliment."

Harry wasn't sure it was a compliment. He found it rather intrusive.

The next day, when Lucius spoke to Harry again, his manner was different. He did not interrogate Harry anymore. The few questions he did ask seemed harmless enough, but Harry still couldn't shake the impression that Lucius Malfoy was after something.

A week passed, and that impression passed with it. Harry was having the best summer of his life. During the day, he and Draco would often walk the grounds of Malfoy Manor, and sometimes take to the air on Nimbus 2001's that the Malfoys owned. At night, they would play Wizard's Chess, read the nightly edition of the Daily Prophet, or talk about old events from Hogwarts.

On the thirteenth night of Harry's stay at Malfoy Manor, Harry and Draco sat in Draco's room playing a round of chess. Harry's situation was dire, but he'd managed to last a lot longer than ever before. Then, out of nowhere, Draco moved a knight and the match was ended.

"Checkmate," said Draco.

"Damn it," Harry cursed.

Draco shrugged. "You're getting better again. You nearly beat me the first time."

Harry nodded. "I'm starting to understand it better again. It's been a really long time since I played."

"I know," said Draco. "Since first year, I think."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

An awkward silence fell over them. Draco cleared away the chess board as Harry sat at the table, wondering what it was that Draco wanted to discuss. Harry knew he wanted to say something.

"Potter," said Draco when the chess board was gone, "I want to know something."

"Yeah?"

"It's serious."

"Okay... Ask."

"You'd better answer," Draco said, a hint of aggravation in his voice.

"I will," said Harry. He was sure no question Draco could ask him would be a question he couldn't answer.

"You know why you haven't played Wizard's Chess in a really long time?"

Harry shrugged. "No time for it I guess?"

"Wrong. It was because of the bloody Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean?"

Draco stood up and clenched his fists, walking to the window of his bedroom.

"I mean, last year, when the Chamber was open, you completely shut down."

"No I didn't," said Harry. "I worked until I almost died to save Hogwarts. It's my home."

"I know what you were doing," Draco snapped. "That's not it. I understand that. I don't understand why you didn't ask me or Blaise or anyone else for help. You had us for the Philosopher's Stone. Hell, you even had that mudblood Granger. Last year, you were alone, and you didn't want any help at all. I tried to help you many times."

"I know," said Harry.

"You know, do you? Then why the hell did you have to be such an ass about it?" Draco demanded.

"Because," Harry snapped, "I had to get it done. I didn't want anything to slow me down. I had to save Hogwarts. You don't understand."

"I don't understand, not really," said Draco. "You're right, Potter. I don't. Aren't we friends?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "I reckon we are."

"We are, Potter," Draco said gravely. "You almost died in the Chamber of Secrets."

"Well, I wasn't exactly thinking about Voldemort or a Basilisk, and I didn't expect Bellatrix Lestrange to be there, either!"

"EXACTLY!" Draco practically bellowed.

"Keep it down," Harry advised. "It's way after midnight. Your parents are probably asleep."

"Shut up, Potter," Draco snapped. "We have enchantments. Look, you just said it! You weren't expecting any of those things. You should've let me help you, Potter! Bellatrix is my bloody aunt!"

"You probably couldn't have done anything," said Harry.

"You don't know that."

"Have you even met her?"

"Not really," said Draco. "Father and Mother don't want to be associated with her."

"She's psychopathic," Harry said. "You couldn't have done anything. And Voldemort... that was pure, stupid luck."

"Yeah, of course it was. You were reckless."

"I know!" said Harry. "I know, it was stupid, all right? I made a mistake."

"And you almost died."

"What would have have done?"

"Something!" Draco cried. "I don't know what, but SOMETHING! Merlin, Potter! You can't do it all on your own!"

"I didn't say I could," said Harry. "But, why would you have wanted to help me anyway? You're always complaining about Hogwarts."

"I don't know," Draco said sarcastically. "Maybe because the Dark Lord wasn't just targeting mudbloods? Maybe because I didn't want any Slytherin to die? Maybe I didn't want to die either? MAYBE it was because we are friends?"

"Sorry," said Harry.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I actually really could have used your help. I don't understand you, though."

"I don't understand you, either," said Draco. "The Dark Lord might be crazy, but I respect his ideas. He hates Muggles and mudbloods just like you and me."

"I don't respect him," said Harry coldly. "Not at all. He killed my parents. He murdered the only two people in my life that ever actually loved me! It's HIS fault I had to live with the Dursleys all those years. It was HIM! I don't even know why! I hate him, and I hate Muggles—but I hate him the most."

Draco was silent for a moment. "So, what did those Muggles do to you?"

"What he probably wanted them to do," Harry muttered.

"Who?" asked Draco.

"Voldemort, of course."

A silence settled over the two of them that didn't break for a very long time.

Draco stood at his window, gazing out at the pitch-black grounds of Malfoy Manor. The night was both starless and moonless. It led Harry's mind in the direction of dangers he didn't want to ponder. Sirius Black, Bellatrix Lestrange, Voldemort.

Harry only thought about his life. He hated the reality of it, and he thought that maybe it was all in the past now. Still, he could never forgive the Dursleys or Voldemort. Voldemort had condemned him

to hell and the Dursleys had been the Dark Lord's unwitting pawns. He hated the fact that he had to keep thinking about how much he hated the Muggles and Voldemort. He hate the fact that he wasn't happy, and he hated the fact that he had to hate that too. He felt weak and helpless—like a child. The weight of the world had long since crushed his shoulders and driven him into the ground. He'd picked himself up, and he resented every factor that made that action necessary.

He just wanted peace. Peace like silence, but not like this silence between him and Draco. This silence was the epitome of what Harry hated. He wanted it to end. He wanted things to be normal. He wanted to strangle himself for not being able to do anything about it but complain. His greatest accomplishments had been surviving three attempts at murder by Lord Voldemort, and hating the Dursleys enough to break a spell on their house. None of it had been his doing by willful choice. Everything had been forced. Harry was alone, and he was a child. He suddenly felt very small in the confines of the spacious Malfoy Manor.

"Potter," said Draco suddenly.

"Yes?"

"I don't have many friends," said Draco.

"What?"

"Every bloody person I meet just wants to serve me. Maybe it's because my father is a member of the Ministry. Maybe they think I've got some sort of great power. I don't know. Look at Crabbe and Goyale. Look at Blaise. Look at every Slytherin in our year. None of them are my friends. They only want what they can get out of me and I only want what I can get out of them—none of it is really valuable."

"Even Blaise?"

"You hardly know Blaise, Potter," said Draco.

"He seems nice enough."

"He sticks with us because he's jealous of my money and he likes the fact that you're famous. He doesn't actually like us, or care about what we think, or like, or do—as long as he gets some piece of something important. He's a leech."

"How do you know?"

"I don't," said Draco. "Not for sure. It's just a guess."

"Oh," said Harry. "And what about me?"

"What about you?"

"You said everyone you know wants a piece of you for themselves, and you want a piece of everyone else."

"Yeah. The point is that it doesn't include you, Potter."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. At first, it was because you were famous, and I wanted to be a part of that. Eventually it was because I can see that we think alike, and because I wanted to help you. I don't care about helping anybody else. Nobody else deserves it."

Harry was rendered speechless. He had had absolutely no idea that this was coming. It was very late, however. His eyes were tired and his mind was clouded. This conversation was immensely interesting and its implications were far-reaching. Harry thought that he might have something that he hadn't had in his entire life—a real friend. He'd always considered Draco his friend, but he had never really examined what that meant until tonight. He didn't think he could examine it any further. It was too late, and their exhaustion was making them both insane.

"Thanks," said Harry.

"Yeah," said Draco.

"Let's go to bed," Harry suggested.

Draco nodded. "Probably a good idea. I'm going to end up saying a lot of mental things if we don't."

"Okay," said Harry. "G'night."

"Night," said Draco.

Harry left Draco's room, crossed the hall to his own, and laid down upon the soft, spacious bed that the Malfoy's had provided him with. He had no idea what to think. He was only dimly aware of a sense that he was no longer alone, and the night was no longer quite as dark.

Now, I hope none of you are going to think that this was all overdone or something. I don't think so, and I am immensely curious to see what you have to say about it!

Also, I saw HP and the Deathly Hallows Part 1 twice now. Anybody else agree with me that it is the best movie the filmmakers have made thus far? Was anybody else creeped out by Ralph Fiennes' Voldemort or disgusted by what Helena Bonham Carter's Bellatrix Lestrange did to Hermione? And seriously, now, did anybody REALLY hate Dobby enough from CANON to be HAPPY when he died? I know you all hate him in the context of this fic! Anyway, reviews regarding this chapter and the Deathly Hallows are welcome. Oh, anybody else find it crazy that Bill Nighy was Rufus Scrimgeour?

Chapter 39: Bellatrix and Black

July was hot. Even at dusk on a gloomy day the air was thick and muggy. Narcissa Malfoy preferred the winter to the summer. The cold to the heat. It was her nature to be cold—and the sensation of coldness seemed pleasant.

Her dark robes clung to her skin as she strolled along the spacious grounds of her beautiful home. Her shoes crunched loudly on the gravel. To her left was the tree line of the dark woods that the Malfoys owned; the trees covered their property for many acres. To her right, many yards away, stood her grand mansion. Her son and his friend were inside. Lucius was away for the day at the Ministry.

Narcissa often strolled the grounds of Malfoy Manor in order to gather herself and analyze her thoughts. The air outside was silent. She was alone in solitude. This was a peaceful place where she could contemplate the many things she had on her mind. Being married to Lucius and having the boy that defeated the Dark Lord in her home were an exhausting combination.

Narcissa shared her husband's desire to discover what the secrets were hidden within the mind of Harry Potter. So far, she had learned nothing. Neither had Lucius, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Narcissa had felt uneasy on the first night of Harry's stay when Lucius began an interrogation at the dinner table. She had wanted to tell him to be gentler—to take things slowly. She had forced herself to bite her tongue. She had literally clamped it between her teeth—hard enough to draw blood.

Lucius had then made a show of Dobby, evidentially to gain some sort of emotional understanding or connection with the boy. Narcissa didn't quite understand what exactly that was, but she knew that it was important. She also knew that her husband had failed. Narcissa couldn't be sure what the reason behind his failure was, but it seemed to her that Potter didn't care about Dobby any longer—despite what the house elf had done to the boy.

Lucius had had to revise his strategy afterward. For the past month, he hadn't done anything. He'd merely observed and noted.

Potter had been wary after the initial interrogation, and remained distant with Lucius. After a time, he'd lowered his barriers. Children

were so susceptible, thought Narcissa. So naïve. Her own son, Draco, had had a conversation with Potter. His ideals were warped and twisted. She knew the content of the argument. It was easy for her and Lucius to eavesdrop on Harry's and Draco's private conversations. The boys were best friends, she thought, but Harry's influence wasn't positive.

Narcissa dry-washed her hands and sighed in exasperation. The day would come when Draco would choose to either stand for Potter's muddled, childish philosophy, or the convictions shared by both Narcissa and Lucius.

It would be one way or the other, and Narcissa knew which way it would be. Potter was dangerous for Draco's development. He was a strange idealist. His perspective alarmed Narcissa, though she couldn't quite place why. His words and his thoughts were something she didn't want to consider. They seemed strangely horrifying. She pushed them from her mind.

A figure in black robes was standing in the midst of the albino peacocks which were gathered near a dying tree at the edge of the wood. The sight of it sent a jolt of fear through Narcissa's heart and caused her to draw her wand.

She pointed it at the figure who reached up and lowered a hood.

"Cissy," Bellatrix hissed, "put the wand down."

Narcissa nearly dropped her wand. "Bella?"

"Of course," snapped Bellatrix. She glanced around, searching for any danger that might be lurking about, and then rushed toward Narcissa. The peacocks scattered in fright.

Narcissa could hardly believe she was staring her sister in the face. Bellatrix looked ghastly. Her robes hadn't been cared for very well. They were ripping at the seams. Her face was pale and her heavily lidded brow glistened with sweat. Her dark hair was untamed and wild. Her eyes were mad, and she clutched her wand tightly in her right hand.

"Cissy," whispered Bellatrix, drawing right up to her sister's face. "I have a question."

"Leave," said Narcissa. Her voice sounded detached and hollow in her ears. It was emotionless and toneless. Narcissa had no idea what to feel. She understood that she must feel fear. This could compromise everything. All Potter had to do was look outside through one of the many windows and everything could very well be lost. Her life would never be the same.

"Cissy," said Bellatrix urgently, "this is important. Is the boy here?"

Narcissa glanced toward the house. "Yes."

Bellatrix smiled. "Dirtying up the carpets, is he? Stinking up the halls?"

"No."

"Ah, 'course not." She paused. "Cissy... he's on the move." Bellatrix glanced around—toward the lawn and then toward the woods.

"Who is on the move?" Narcissa demanded.

"Why, my dearest cousin, of course!"

"Black?"

Bellatrix nodded. "Yes."

"You are risking my safety and jeopardizing my family to come here and tell me that Sirius Black is moving? Of course he is, Bella! He's a fugitive!"

"No!" barked Bellatrix. She raised her wand and aimed it at her sister's exposed throat. "You don't understand, Cissy. It's important. Black is on to something."

"What could that possibly be?"

"I don't know yet. But it shook him out of that stupefaction he was in in Azkaban, didn't it? He escaped for a reason and I followed him! I know what it is. I'll do it before him."

"What are you talking about?" Narcissa demanded. "You're completely mad. I saw the articles in the—"

"I'm trying to flush him out!" Bellatrix cried. "It's hard to catch a fugitive, Cissy! The Ministry can't do it, and neither can I. I want what he's after!"

"What is he after?"

Bellatrix flicked her wand toward nothing in particular. "That spineless little bastard that thought he got away."

"What?" Narcissa demanded. "Tell me what you mean or leave. I'm telling you, Bella... Please, you are my sister... but I cannot risk—"

"Never mind what you will and won't risk! Look at ME, Cissy. Look at my face. I risked it all and I lost everything!" Bellatrix shrieked. "That coward you married hasn't got the foggiest idea where it's really at. He's a sniveling traitor—the impotent little weasel! Just like the rest of them—deserters! I've suffered more than any of you, and I will be rewarded one day soon!"

"You're making no sense."

"Of course you don't think so, you spineless bitch. I am risking everything, Cissy! Not you. Me! I just wanted to tell you that Black is after the bastard, and it might do you some good to think about that instead of picking that boy's brains for things that aren't there."

"How dare you—"

"How dare you," mocked Bellatrix in a sickeningly high-pitched tone of voice. "Later you'll be wishing you had gone down on your knees and begged me for my help. This is our chance, Cissy! You're squandering it!"

"I—"

"No," said Bellatrix, drawing her wand up to the bridge of her sister's nose. "No, I think that's enough for now. I gave you your chance. You don't understand, so you aren't worthy. Bye now, Cissy. Remember what your sister told you. When you become a big girl and admit you were a fool, I'll put in a nice word."

Bellatrix Disapparated with a loud pop. Narcissa stood in one spot, fighting the urge to run. She was frozen in place by a number of horrifying thoughts. What if Harry or Draco had seen Bellatrix? That would be the end of it. All would be lost in the way of the boy.

What haunted her the most was the word 'bastard'. Narcissa couldn't understand. Bellatrix had always been insane, even before her imprisonment in Azkaban. She was demented now, after so many years in that place. Narcissa had no idea what she was after, or what Sirius Black was after. She understood that they both wanted the same thing, but she had no idea what it was. It couldn't possibly be Harry Potter. He was inside the manor. If Bellatrix had wanted him, she could've gone and taken him. Narcissa was sure she would've been unable to stop her. Bellatrix had caught her fully off guard.

But perhaps it was Harry she was after—there was, after all, a chance. Sirius Black might be searching for him, and Bellatrix might be watching Harry in order to position herself for an ambush. It would be like the hunter placing the prey out in the open after she'd cornered it. In hiding, she would wait for the other predator, as he would surely come for the opportunity to take the prey. Then, the hunter would take both the predator and the prey in one stroke. It was an old tactic. Perhaps that was what Bellatrix wanted. Narcissa couldn't know. She couldn't be sure. Lucius had to be told.

She rushed off toward the manor to send an owl to her husband.

XxX

That night the summer saw its first major storm. The warm air coupled with the cold and produced a raging thunderstorm that hurled torrents of rain down upon Malfoy Manor. Harry and Draco sat in Draco's room playing wizard's chess and talking about everything and nothing again. Lightning flashed like strobe lights through the green curtains of Draco's windows every now and then. It was always followed immediately by a booming clap of thunder so loud, that it sounded to Harry like someone was firing a rifle right outside Draco's bedroom.

Harry won against Draco in wizard's chess that night. He finally found his long lost skill again. It was like slipping on an old pair of

gloves. Draco congratulated Harry upon his victory, but vowed that he would redouble his efforts next time. Harry had grown very fond of his one and only true friend over the past few weeks. He saw things in Draco he'd never really taken the time to notice before—a refreshingly blunt manner of speaking, wit, and a cunning intelligence that both matched and sometimes surpassed Harry's own in many ways.

Harry decided that there were two things he was thankful for in his life. Hogwarts and Malfoy Manor—though it was Hogwarts itself that gave Harry a feeling of belonging. Harry had felt no such bond with Malfoy Manor, but, rather, with a person inside the house—Draco.

"I think it's time to call it a night," said Draco. He drew his wand and levitated the chess board away. Harry felt amused and smug every time he watched Draco perform magic and every time he himself did too. It was true that Draco was allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts without fear of penalty or punishment. Having a father with such intricate ties in the Ministry of Magic certainly did have its benefits.

Draco explained to Harry that underage wizards had a 'trace' cast upon them. The trace was used to detect the underage usage of magic in young witches and wizards. It was constantly monitored by a special office in the Ministry of Magic until it broke when its subject turned seventeen. Draco told Harry that his father had many friends in that particular office of the Ministry, and that they kindly looked the other way whenever Draco decided to do a bit of law-breaking. That ignorance was generously extended to Harry so long as Harry remained in Malfoy Manor.

"It's late," said Harry. "I'm hungry."

"I'm tired," said Draco. "Go down to the kitchen and get yourself food if you want. My mother and father won't mind."

Harry shrugged. "If you don't want any, then... Good night."

"Good night, Potter."

Harry left Draco's room and closed the door behind him. As he stepped out into the corridor, a booming clap of thunder shook the entire mansion and the sound of rain pelting the windows intensified

to the point of mimicking rapid gunfire. The wind howled like a tortured ghost outside, and it gave Harry goosebumps.

For no real reason, Harry decided it would be best to step lightly as he walked down the corridor and toward the stairs. The thunder, wind, and rain were loud enough to mask the sound of his footsteps, but it didn't make a difference to him. He felt as if he were trespassing, though he'd walked the corridors of Malfoy Manor many times at night.

He quietly descended the stairs. The wind outside died down to give way to the sound of voices.

Harry paused at the foot of the stairs to listen.

"I can't imagine what it means," said Lucius. His tone was stressed.

"Neither can I," said Narcissa. She sounded a mess. "She couldn't possibly have meant the boy. It would've made no sense. She could've easily taken him."

Harry had no idea what Narcissa meant or who she was talking about, but he realized very quickly that this was a conversation he was not meant to hear. He stood there, at the foot of the stairs, not daring to move. He listened as Lucius and Narcissa continued.

"I know," said Lucius. "That's what troubles me. Tell me again what her exact words were."

"She said that he was after 'that spineless little bastard that got away'."

"She said that about Black?"

Sirius Black? Harry thought that Lucius must mean Sirius Black. Harry hadn't given Black, who'd escaped from Azkaban Prison with Bellatrix Lestrange several months ago much thought, but it was evident by the way Lucius and Narcissa spoke about the subject that it was very important and extremely secret.

"Yes," said Narcissa. "And... it just doesn't make sense."

"It might," said Lucius. "Consider the age old tactic of baiting the prey, my dear. If your sister is watching the boy, she might be waiting for Black to come and strike."

Bellatrix was Narcissa's sister, thought Harry. She was watching him in order to catch Black? Harry glanced around and reached for his wand. The thought of Bellatrix Lestrange lurking about in the darkness unnerved him. What Narcissa and Lucius were saying also greatly disturbed Harry. He wondered wildly how they could know such things.

"Yes," Narcissa agreed. "I thought so as well. But it still doesn't make sense. She said the 'bastard' that 'got away'."

"Naturally," said Lucius. Harry could hear the smile of revelation coloring his voice. "Think, my dear. Potter is now fatherless—a 'bastard' child by no small stretch of the definition. The Dark Lord tried and failed to kill him... he got away."

"I know," snapped Narcissa. There was a pause as she took a breath. "But it still makes no sense to me. Why would Sirius Black want to kill Harry Potter?"

"Ah, but you remember the rumors? Sirius Black was said to have betrayed the Potter's to the Dark Lord. Perhaps she thinks he wants to finish the job."

Harry's eyes widened, he descended the last step, drawn closer to the sound of Lucius' voice. The story that Lucius was about to tell was something Harry had to hear. The small introduction Lucius had already given chilled Harry's blood.

"Yes, but we both know that—"

"I know," said Lucius. "But your sister is..."

There was a pause.

"The enchantments," whispered Narcissa so quietly that Harry almost could not hear it.

"Yes," said Lucius. "One of them has broken the enchantment in the hallway."

There was another pause which was followed by the sound of small pop.

All was silent.

Harry stood there at the foot of the stairs, his heart pounding like a hammer. He waited for a moment and heard nothing. Seconds passed in agonizing silence. Those seconds bled into minutes of utter nothingness. Harry could hardly believe it. Lucius and Narcissa had created enchantments to warn them of Harry or Draco's intrusion. They obviously hadn't paid any attention to the enchantments until the moment that Narcissa spoke of them, because Harry was sure he'd broken the one in the hallway a long time ago.

They must've cast another one to stop the sound of their voices, thought Harry. They didn't know he'd heard them, of that he was sure. If they had, they would've come to the stairs. They had merely taken a precaution.

Harry would learn no more. He ascended the stairs slowly as the wind began to moan and the thunder boomed again.

Harry made his way to his room, fists clenched. He felt cold and clammy. His eyes were wide and his mind was racing.

Sirius Black. Harry kept repeating the name in his mind.

He was the one that betrayed Harry's parents to Voldemort. He was, in many ways, responsible for all the misery and agony Harry had been made to endure. He had led the Dark Lord to Harry's parents. He was one of the main reasons they were dead. But that wasn't all. Lucius had used the word 'betrayed'. Sirius Black had betrayed Harry's parents to Voldemort. They must've known Sirius. Perhaps they were even his friends.

Harry swallowed against the lump in his throat.

His knees hit his bed. He hadn't even realized he was already in his room.

Harry sat down on the foot of his bed and pulled his glasses off of his face. He set them down next to him and buried his head in his hands.

Betrayed, thought Harry. Sirius Black betrayed his parents. He must've been their friend.

Betrayed by a friend, thought Harry.

Never before had Harry been so acutely aware of the pain he felt whenever he thought of his parents. He'd never known them. The only memory he had was one of his mother or his father—or maybe both of them together. They stood above him. Warm, he thought. They were warm and caring. They spoke to him, but he didn't remember their words. He only remembered the feeling the words conveyed. He was loved, thought Harry.

His parents were the only people who'd shown him any love up until his time at Hogwarts, and even then the love he'd found there hadn't really been love. There were very few people who really cared about him. Harry could count them all one hand. Snape, thought Harry. Snape cared about him. That was evident by the way he'd spoken to the Dursleys. Dumbledore said he cared about Harry, but Harry didn't believe it. Draco also cared about Harry—he was his best friend.

But his parents were his parents, and they could never be replaced. Harry saw the life he might've had if Voldemort hadn't murdered them. He saw that life so clearly and so vividly that it brought hot, stinging tears to the corners of his eyes. Then he saw the mugshot of Sirius Black, and the picture of what might've been died in a flash of green light.

Harry could hardly believe it. He didn't think of how Lucius and Narcissa knew it. He didn't think about the suspiciousness he might've had for Narcissa—for how she'd heard Bellatrix say what she said. He thought only of Sirius Black and how much he hated him.

Harry cried himself to sleep that night, thinking only of how rotten it was that there were so many people he had to hate. There was only one he really wanted to kill.

Chapter 40: Diagonally Downward

Severus Snape did not break his promises. This was obviously a quality that Harry Potter appreciated, but Lucius Malfoy found it to be troublesome. Lucius was suspicious of Severus' intentions. Recently he had been reconsidering the decision he'd made nearly thirteen years ago to name the man as his only son's godfather. Severus' loyalties were stretched in Lucius' mind. Either he was a fanatic so deeply devoted to the Dark Lord that he suffered and obeyed every command given to him by Albus Dumbledore, or else he was a fanatic so deeply devoted to Dumbledore that he would risk his life in order to appear devoted to the Dark Lord. Lucius wasn't sure which was true, or even if either of them were true. Severus Snape was a very secretive man. Lucius didn't like secretive men. One could never predict the actions of any man that kept important information to himself and only himself. Lucius was as defenseless as a common, ignorant mudblood unless he was able to predict. He, of course, would never admit such a truth to anyone—including himself. Just vaguely considering such topics of thought was sacrilege in the face of the elder Malfoy's infinite intellectual capacity.

Snape arrived at Malfoy Manor in early August, a few weeks before term at Hogwarts was scheduled to commence.

Lucius didn't doubt that Snape came prepared to interrogate him about what he'd done to torture, warp, or convert Harry Potter. Lucius was prepared for such a scenario. He would also emerge victorious because he would win by default. Lucius had slowed his efforts to pick the brains of Harry Potter. He'd slowed them so much that they had almost come to a halt—almost.

In reality, Lucius was no far more concerned with his sister-in-law and her cousin. His quest to discover what secrets Harry Potter kept hidden became less important the night that Narcissa had informed him of Bellatrix's visit.

Lucius, at one point in time, had been successfully integrated into the Dark Lord's deepest inner circle. He was one of three. The other two were Bellatrix Lestrange and Severus Snape. Lucius suspected that, besides Bellatrix and Sirius Black himself, he was one of the few Death Eaters that knew the truth about the deaths of James and Lily Potter.

It had not been Sirius Black that betrayed their location to the Dark Lord. In fact, it had been a lowly little coward named Peter Pettigrew—a quiet Death Eater that was too squeamish about his true nature to really have a choice in the matter. Sirius Black was rumored to have killed Pettigrew as revenge for his hand in the deaths of the Potters. All that was found of Pettigrew was a single finger.

Lucius, therefore, wondered what Bellatrix could have possibly meant. It had not been Black's intention to cause the death of James or Lily Potter. In fact, Black had been most aggrieved to learn of their demise as evidenced by the brutal murder of Peter Pettigrew. It wouldn't make sense for him to want to 'finish the job' by killing Harry Potter. After all, Black hadn't even started 'the job'. There was no reason for him to want to finish it.

Lucius had to assume that Bellatrix was talking about someone or something else. The term she had used, 'bastard', could really be used to describe anyone for whom she felt contempt. There were many people that fit that description—Bellatrix liked very few people.

Lucius wanted to know what she meant. He wanted to know more than anything. He was afraid, however, that an answer would not reveal itself in any short measure of time. The truth was often like that.

Truth takes time, thought Lucius.

Snape, unaware of Lucius' pondering, paid him no courtesy. He interrupted the elder Malfoy's thoughts without hesitation or consideration. Lucius was sure, of course, that even if Snape knew he was considering important things, he would interrupt anyway.

Snape walked casually down the long drive of Malfoy Manor, focused solely on his destination. He paid the wrought iron gate no mind. He simply raised his wand, casted the necessary spell, and walked straight through the gate as if it wasn't really there. Lucius stood in front of the threshold of his home. The door was closed behind him. His expression was carefully composed—amused. Snape's expression was stoic and unreadable. Lucius didn't like that.

"Good afternoon, Severus," said Lucius cordially.

"Good afternoon," said Snape. "Let's skip the pretense," he said tersely. "I am here for a specific reason. We both know what it is."

"You are ever so crass," said Lucius. "Why are you in such a hurry, my friend?"

"Forgive me for not developing a tolerance to the foolishness of your favorite type of pretense. I do not care to mince words with you, Lucius."

"Ah, but mincing words is what I do best, Severus."

"I am aware of that. It's what kept you out of Azkaban, is it not?"

"Perhaps," said Lucius. "But, I'm afraid I don't like to look at it that way. What was it that kept you out of Azkaban, Severus?"

Snape frowned. "The strictest obedience."

"Obedience to whose orders?"

"We've been down this path many times before. I am growing tired of reminding you that it would be impractical and even dangerous for me to reveal what I am doing. The Dark Lord has an endgame and so does Albus Dumbledore. I am a spectator whose purpose is to gather information."

Lucius smiled pleasantly. "Very well, Severus. Continue with your cryptic talk."

"I will," said Snape, "gladly. You may also continue to allow it to infuriate you."

Lucius half chuckled, half grunted.

"You're an insufferable hypocrite," said Snape with the knowledge that he had defeated Lucius in this battle of words.

Lucius half smiled. "And you are forever a mystery."

"Good," said Snape. "I am adhering to my duty flawlessly."

"I daresay you are," said Lucius. "Now, shall we discuss what you came here to discuss?"

"Surprising," said Snape. "I can hardly believe you are suggesting it."

"I am not entirely predictable."

Snape half smiled this time. "Self-flattery. Tasteless. Of course, unwarranted self-flattery is, by far, more grievous."

"Enough," said Lucius coldly. "Potter is well."

"Ah," said Snape. "I am glad to hear it."

"But you don't believe it," said Lucius. It wasn't a question.

"Not entirely," said Snape. "After all, I never expected any harm to come to the boy—at least, not harm inflicted by your hand."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You do," said Snape.

"You are—"

"Enough," Snape interjected. "I am growing tired of these games. Allow me to say what you refuse to. We are both aware that my concern for Potter's well being is not rooted in my suspicions of your intentions—and I do harbor suspicions—but, rather, your relationship to Bellatrix Lestrange."

Lucius tried to not appear flustered by the mention of her name. Years of battling and conquering in the political arena served him well. He had developed an infallible poker face. He wore it now, in front of Snape, but he wasn't as confident as he usually would be. Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, had been fooled by Lucius on an uncountable number of occasions, as had many others. There weren't many people as practiced in the art of lying as Lucius Malfoy.

Somehow, though, Lucius thought that he wasn't winning the quiet battle that Snape had initiated.

"What of Bellatrix?" asked Lucius.

"You know very well," said Snape. "I made it very clear last time we spoke."

"I can assure you that we've heard nothing of Bellatrix."

Snape drew his wand and leveled it at Lucius' throat. Lucius did not react.

"You're lying," said Snape. "As great as you think you are, your skill in Occlumency is amateur at best. You, like every other sniveling politician think that a cursory study of Occlumency will make your mind impregnable. You might be correct, because Occlumency isn't a skill many wizards take the time to study fully. Your amateur skill might, therefore, suffice. You would do well to remember, however, that I am very skilled in both Occlumency and Legilimency and it is useless to lie to me."

Lucius nodded. "Of course I remember, Severus. That is why I am not lying to you."

"You're hiding something," said Snape.

"I'm always hiding something," said Lucius dismissively. "We all have our secrets."

Snape lowered his wand. "Regrettably, I cannot do what I wish to do."

"Why is that?"

"It isn't for you to know," said Snape. "Potter is well. I know you aren't lying about that. I know he is on the second floor of your house this very moment, talking with your son."

Lucius smiled. "The best of friends, they are."

"Indeed," said Snape. "And you don't like it."

Lucius didn't answer with words. He simply shrugged.

"Amusing," Snape remarked. He reached into the pockets of his robes and produced two envelopes. He handed them to both Lucius. "Start of term letters for your son and for Potter."

"Very good," said Lucius. "I'm sure they'll be happy to read them."

"Undoubtedly," said Snape. "If I return again before the summer ends, it will be unannounced."

"You are always welcome here, Severus—announcement or no announcement."

"I will discover what you are hiding from me," said Snape.

"Oh," said Lucius, "I'm sure you will. In time... Good afternoon, Severus."

Snape did not respond. He simply spun and Disapparated on the spot. Lucius scowled and opened the door to his home. He crossed the threshold and slammed the door closed behind him.

XxX

Harry was both excited and annoyed. The electives that he and Draco had both chosen were undoubtedly the easiest that Hogwarts had to offer, but Harry still didn't like the sound of either of them. Divination, the study of the art of looking into the future sounded like a load of foolishness to Harry. Draco told him that Divination was taught by a batty woman named Professor Trelawney. She was, apparently, quite off her rocker.

Care of Magical creatures was the other elective. That was self explanatory. Harry had encountered a magical creature called a basilisk before. It hadn't been an enjoyable experience. He wasn't looking forward to meeting any more animals that might want to kill him.

The rest of his schedule was the same as it had always been: Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, History of Magic. Harry was not looking forward to any more lectures from Professor Binns. He also wasn't enthusiastic about the workload McGonagall was bound to give. In his two years at Hogwarts, Harry had learned that Transfiguration was the most

difficult subject in the entire curriculum. He supposed it was logical. After all, Transfiguration was the art of turning things into things that they were not meant to be. It was magic that bent the law of identity. There were very specific, complex theories about how this was to be done, and they were very, very difficult to comprehend. McGonagall had once tried to explain to them that the law of identity was an axiomatic concept and therefore unbreakable; it was the job of Transfiguration to skirt around the specific criteria the law of identity contained. Harry had had no idea what she was talking about. He wasn't exactly looking forward to hearing her lectures again. But, he was looking forward to returning to Hogwarts.

The letter that Lucius had presented him had apparently come from Snape. Harry was disappointed to learn that Snape had visited Malfoy Manor and he had not seen him. Lucius seemed to be annoyed and glad that Snape had left. Harry didn't know why.

Harry wasn't sure he liked Lucius very much. He wasn't much like his son.

Harry and Draco had both opened their letters at the same time and read them silently.

Harry's had said:

Dear Mr. Harry Potter

We are pleased to inform you that your third year of study at Hogwarts school will begin on September 1. Please arrive at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ before 11 AM on August 31. You will find a list of your courses, a list of your required textbooks, and a permission slip to attend Hogsmeade trips.

Trips to Hogsmeade are open to third years as well as all years above. They occur at scheduled times throughout the year. In order to attend these trips, your parent(s) or legal guardian(s) must sign the permission slip enclosed with this letter. Please bring this permission slip with you to school and give it to your head of house by the first day of term. All students who wish to attend trips to Hogsmeade **MUST** have this permission slip signed and on record. **NO ACCEPTIONS.**

We look forward to seeing you again.

Sincerely,

Minerva M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry had been disappointed to realize that Draco could go to Hogsmeade and he could not. Lucius, however, kindly offered to sign Harry's permission slip. Harry wasn't sure if Lucius' signature would be accepted, but Lucius assured him that no one would dare refuse it.

A week or so later, Harry and the Malfoys traveled via the floo network to Diagon Alley.

Harry and Draco had spent the week prior to the outing talking about Hogwarts and how interesting and, in some cases, annoying it would be to have to return. The night before they departed for Diagon Alley, Harry was sitting in his room writing his sporadic thoughts and doodling depictions of them on an old piece of parchment.

He started at the sound of an owl's beak pecking on his window. He ran to the window, threw it open, and allowed an elderly, gray owl to enter his room. Tied with violet thread to the owl's leg was a letter. Harry gave the gray owl a treat (much to Hedwig's annoyance) and sent it on his way. If he had to reply immediately to the letter, he would use Hedwig. He didn't like entrusting messages to other owls.

Harry unrolled the letter and frowned when he recognized the handwriting.

Dear Harry,

Please meet me at the Leaky Cauldron tomorrow in the afternoon during your venture to Diagon Alley. We must discuss your guardianship. This is, of course, an urgent matter. You may choose to arrive at the Leaky Cauldron any time you wish. I will be there all day. I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry and the Malfoys went to Diagon Alley the next day. Harry wasn't in the brightest of moods.

The Malfoys offered to pay for everything Harry wanted to buy, but he declined their generous offer. He wanted to put off his meeting with Dumbledore for as long as possible. He decided to use his withdrawal of money from Gringotts as a way to kill time. Naturally, the goblins led him to his vault and he withdrew his money in record time. It was funny, thought Harry, how time seemed to pass so quickly when he was not looking forward to something.

After a trip to a potions store and Madam Malkin's, Harry and the Malfoys went to Flourish and Blott's. There, they purchased the three books that they were required to buy: The Standard Book of Spells Grade 3 by Miranda Goshawk, The Monster Book of Monsters (a particularly vicious volume that had a bad temperament and sharp teeth...literally), and Unfogging the Future by Casandra Vablatzky (a hefty volume that lacked a single, objective sentence; all material inside the book was decidedly subjective and impossible to decipher).

Harry could put it off no longer. He informed Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco that Dumbledore wanted to meet him in the Leaky Cauldron. Lucius offered to accompany Harry, but Harry declined. He told them to go get a bite to eat or something. He assured them that the meeting would not be long, although he had no idea how much time Dumbledore would take.

Lucius seemed annoyed as he walked away with his wife and his son.

Harry made his way to the Leaky Cauldron.

Sorry for shortness and update length time... or whatever. Hopefully the next chapter will come faster.

Chapter 41: A Demented Homecoming

The Leaky Cauldron was packed—most of the occupants were gathered around the bar. Wizards drank a lot, thought Harry. Most of the wizards here seemed to be a rather mangy, scraggly lot. They did not look out of place in a barroom at one o'clock in the afternoon. It seemed natural for all of them to be drunk this early; it was as though they had no lives and their existence was dedicated to frequent and indulgent intoxication.

Harry made his way between the occupied tables of the Cauldron, searching for any sign of Dumbledore. He noticed the Weasleys eating lunch with Hermione Granger. Ron and Hermione sat next to one another. They talked and laughed and added to the din. Harry was disgusted by the sight. Granger, though a Gryffindor, was far too intelligent to be fraternizing with the likes of Ronald Weasley. She should have been a Slytherin, thought Harry—or, at the very least, a Ravenclaw.

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore's voice from behind him. Harry turned to face the headmaster who had magically appeared in the midst of all the commotion.

"Professor," said Harry in a toneless acknowledgement.

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "Please, follow me. We shall go upstairs where it is quieter."

Harry and Dumbledore made their way through the throng of drinking witches and wizards. They threaded in between tables and Dumbledore kindly excused them when people stood blocking their way. Several of them caught sight of Harry's scar and one attempted to seize his hand in order to shake it. Dumbledore stopped the man and almost everyone noticed—Dumbledore's presence was hardly inconspicuous. Even drunks weren't oblivious. After that, everyone that wasn't accustomed to seeing the famous Harry Potter walking around in the Wizarding World only shouted their greetings and well-wishings to Harry. This, naturally, attracted even more attention.

By the time Harry and Dumbledore were at the stairs, almost everyone was watching them. Harry locked eyes with a stony-faced Hermione for a moment. Ron Weasley scowled at him. Harry resisted the urge to make an obscene gesture in Ron's direction.

He followed Dumbledore up the stairs and to the rooms of the Leaky Cauldron. It was silent up there. Harry thought it must be enchanted.

He followed Dumbledore down a long, rather crooked hall that looked as if it had been built by the drunks downstairs. They stopped at closed door at the very end. Dumbledore opened the door and they stepped into a small, bare room; the only furniture was a single, simple desk with chairs on either side. Atop the desk sat a thin stack of parchment that was riddled with official Ministry insignias and Wizengamot symbols. A plain, white quill resting inside an unremarkable ink bottle sat beside the parchment.

Dumbledore took a seat on the side of the desk facing away from the door and gestured for Harry to take a seat in front of him. Harry did so.

Upon sitting down, Harry folded his hands, waiting impatiently as Dumbledore examined a few of the documents on the desk before him. He read them through the lenses of his half-moon spectacles. Harry could barely see the eyes behind them, but he thought that they looked tired.

After a short time, Dumbledore spoke. His words lacked the usual amount of babbling preamble.

"I know that you would prefer it if I kept this conversation short, Harry," said Dumbledore. His eyes flicked upward and locked with Harry's. They did indeed look very tired. Absent was their usual, happy twinkle. Harry was suddenly under the impression that Dumbledore wanted to have this conversation even less than he did. "We are here to discuss the issue of your guardianship."

"What about it?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore half-smiled as if he found some sort of charming naivety in Harry's question. Harry understood why Dumbledore might think that, but, in his mind, the issue of his guardianship was unimportant and already settled. Hogwarts was his home. The only time he had to worry about alternative lodging was during the summer. The Malfoys seemed keen on providing that.

"The Dursleys were your last remaining blood relatives," said Dumbledore. His voice contained a slight hint of dejection. "Their guardianship over you has been... revoked—by your choice. As Headmaster of Hogwarts, I have taken temporary guardianship over you." Dumbledore paused as if he thought that Harry might protest. Harry said nothing, although he didn't like Dumbledore's words at all. "Since you have no relatives, a special committee of the Wizengamot has been appointed to provide you with a new guardian or new guardians. This process could take a long time without your help. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of small technicalities with this case. There are also strict guidelines that dictate eligibility for guardianship. If you would provide me with a few candidates, the process could be made easier... Who would you like to live with, Harry?"

"The Malfoys?" said Harry.

"Ah," said Dumbledore. "That may be difficult. Lucius Malfoy is under the employment of the Ministry of Magic. The criteria are strict for potential guardians; it becomes tricky to meet if the potential guardian is under the employment of the Ministry of Magic. It's all very political."

Harry scowled. "I already spent the entire summer with the Malfoys. I like it there. Draco is my friend."

"This may be true," said Dumbledore. "However, the Malfoys may not be eligible for your guardianship."

"Aren't you the Head of the Wizengamot or something?" Harry demanded.

"My influence in the Wizengamot is... powerful," said Dumbledore.

"Could you answer my question directly?"

"I'm sorry Harry, but we are dealing with issues of a political nature."

"I don't like them."

"Need I remind you that this is a result of your choice?"

Harry bit his tongue. He could feel his face redden in anger.

"My choice?" snapped Harry. "Of course it was! I had to make that choice! I HAD NO OTHER CHOICE!"

"Please, Harry, let's not shout at one another," said Dumbledore calmly. Harry found his manner infuriating.

"Oh, of course not," said Harry. The sarcasm in his voiced sounded cutting, even to his own ears. "But we aren't shouting at each other! I'm shouting at you!" Harry felt rather stupid as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "And, of course, you have every right to be ang-"

"Angry doesn't even... it wouldn't even cut it—at all!" Harry roared. "You have got to be insane! You saw what was-"

"That's quite enough," said Dumbledore. "I am familiar with your point of view, Harry."

The words 'point of view' set something off in Harry's mind. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so furious. He couldn't even remember if he'd ever been so furious. He could feel his heart beating like a hammer in his chest cavity. His skin felt hot and prickly, as though he'd just been tossed into a fire. His teeth were clenched tightly—partly because he was resisting the urge to unleash a violent slew of profanity in the senile Headmaster's face.

This wasn't a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The idea made him positively apoplectic. There were objective facts. Harry's empty stomach; his parched throat; his tired, aching muscles; the bruises on his back; they years of constant ridicule and neglect. It was a wonder he wasn't insane. Maybe he was insane. If so, that was the doing of the Dursley's, and it was Dumbledore's fault they'd been allowed to do it.

So, Harry simply kept his mouth shut. He snagged his tongue between his teeth and bit hard, producing a sharp, tangy flavor that hinted of blood.

"I can see that we are getting nowhere," Dumbledore continued. "Therefore, I think it's best we end this meeting."

"Excellent idea," said Harry. He meant it too. This was the best idea Dumbledore had probably ever had.

"Very well," said Dumbledore. His eyes were no longer in line with Harry's. He was looking down at the piece of parchment. His shoulders were drooped, and his hands sat uselessly in his lap. Harry had never seen a man look so defeated. The thought almost made him laugh. Dumbledore was supposedly the greatest wizard of the present era. He had discovered however many uses for dragon's blood; he'd worked alongside some of the greatest minds in the world like Nicholas Flamel; he'd defeated one of the most dangerous Dark Wizards in the world—Gellert Grindelwald. He'd accomplished things Harry could only dream of accomplishing. And yet, there he sat, defeated by the words of a thirteen year old boy.

"You are free to go, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I will remind you that you still have a long time to suggest a potential guardian for yourself. You have almost the entire school year. Until then, the Wizengamot's committee with search."

"Fine," said Harry. He stood up to leave. Dumbledore made no move to stop him.

"Good day to you, Harry. I shall see you at school."

Harry said nothing. He left the room and slammed the door behind him. The din in the barroom of the Leaky Cauldron greeted him like the scream he desperately wanted to unleash.

Harry walked downstairs, passed the Weasleys and Granger without a glance, and headed to the door that led to Diagon Alley. He met the Malfoys there. They must have noticed something about his demeanor or some look on his face because they did not inquire about what had happened. Harry appreciated that. He followed them into the dark recesses of Knockturn Alley. Narcissa said some words about exhaustion from a hard day of shopping. Apparition wasn't the favored mode of transportation. They took the Floo Network back to Malfoy Manor.

Harry and Draco took their new supplies to their respective rooms. Harry spent a while packing his things away in silence. They ate dinner that night together. Harry only spoke when spoken to. He

offered no details about his conversation with Dumbledore. Something about Lucius' manner seemed to indicate that the elder Malfoy was intensely curious, but he refrained from seriously asking anything.

After dinner, Harry retired to his bedroom.

He glanced through one of his new textbooks to take his mind off the conversation with Dumbledore. He read and did not comprehend. He could not focus. An hour or so passed before a knock on his door interrupted him.

"Yeah?" Harry said. He wasn't angry. The knock wasn't a disturbance to him. It was simply a knock.

"Potter?" said Draco from the other side of the door.

"Come in," said Harry.

He heard the door open but didn't turn to look at Draco. He was sitting on his bed, facing away from the door. He heard Draco shut the door quietly behind him and, for a long moment, everything was silent.

"So," said Draco. "Are you going to tell me what happened? Obviously it wasn't good."

"Obviously," Harry agreed.

"I've never seen you so..."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I don't feel like talking about it right now."

"Okay," said Draco. "Tell me later."

"Sure," said Harry neutrally.

"Well... 'night, then" said Draco.

"G'night," said Harry.

Draco left. Soon after had gone, Harry extinguished the lights in his room and tried went to sleep, despite the fact it was far too early.

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Harry's last few days of summer were spent in general solitude. Draco seemed like he wanted to be informed about Dumbledore's conversation with Harry, and Lucius Malfoy also hinted that he wished to know. Both of them did not explicitly inquire about it again after Harry told them no. He wasn't going to talk about it at the present and that was his final decision. Draco and Lucius did not ask him again—at least not directly. However, Harry could see the question imposed in their every glance and expression. It only made him want to return to Hogwarts even more.

When the day came, the morning was relatively quiet and the process was smooth. Harry, though he often thought himself bad at preparation (he liked to procrastinate), had packed his bags prior to the day of departure. The Malfoys, along with Harry, Apparated to King's Cross Station.

They made their way silently and purposefully to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. At the Platform, Lucius and Narcissa exchanged goodbyes with Harry and Draco. Harry thanked them for their generosity and hospitality. Lucius insisted that no thanks was required and that Harry was, of course, invited to return whenever he wished—and for whatever length of time. Harry thanked the elder Malfoy for his offer and made sure to note that he intended to take advantage of it. This seemed to please Lucius, and Harry suspected that, during his next stay at Malfoy Manor (probably around Christmas time), he would be questioned about his conversation with Dumbledore once more. Lucius was patient; he probably also understood (with his extensive background in politics), that the matter they had discussed could be postponed for quite a long time.

Harry and Draco boarded the Hogwarts Express, luggage in tow. Hedwig gave a loud screech as they reached the first and only empty compartment on the entire train, which was located at the very back. Harry shushed her without much force. He got the impression that she wasn't looking forward to the long train ride. She had enjoyed her freedom with the Malfoys over the summer. The prospect of being confined to her cage for a number of hours was probably unappealing—especially since she would undoubtedly find it difficult to sleep aboard the Express.

Harry and Draco stepped into the compartment and almost left again. It wasn't unoccupied, as it had originally appeared. A man sat on one of the seats, wrapped in a dark cloak and apparently asleep. They could not see his face.

"Damn it," said Draco irritably.

Harry just shrugged. "We should probably just stay here. I don't know where Blaise is, so it's probably best that we don't go looking for another compartment. I don't want to be with anyone else."

"Okay," said Draco in agreement. "Do you think he's really asleep?"

Harry looked at the cloaked man. He was completely still apart from the slow, rhythmic rising and falling of his chest.

"Yeah," said Harry quietly.

"Do you think he'll stay asleep?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Not really."

Harry set his things as quietly as he possibly could on the luggage rack. Hedwig snipped at his fingers between the bars of her cage. He chided her firmly but quietly and told her to be patient. He felt like he was talking to a child. Hedwig seemed to sense this and placed her head under her wing indignantly.

Draco put away his luggage and both Draco and Harry took a seat across from the sleeping man as the train began to pull away from the platform.

"Who do you think he is?" said Harry as Draco watched the parents on the platform, waving goodbye to their children.

"No idea," said Draco. "An Auror? There was something in the Daily Prophet about the Ministry intending to strengthen security at Hogwarts because of Black and Lestrage."

"Maybe," said Harry.

A loud rapping suddenly sounded. Someone was knocking on the door to the compartment.

Draco grunted in annoyance, cast a look at the sleeping man who appeared undisturbed, and quickly stood up and opened the door. He found Blaise on the other side.

"Oh," said Draco. "Good."

Blaise smiled. "I've been looking everywhere for you two." He stepped into the compartment, bringing his luggage with him, and nodded at Harry. "Hello, Potter."

"Hi," said Harry tonelessly.

Blaise then looked to the sleeping man. "Is that the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor?" he asked. "I heard he was on the train."

"No idea," said Draco. "Maybe. I thought he was an Auror or something. The Ministry is supposed to provide Hogwarts with protection until Black and Lestrage are caught. Who is the new professor, anyway? My father never mentioned anything about him." Draco paused. "That's odd, really. He usually does."

"I don't know," said Blaise. "It doesn't matter. Let's just not wake him up, agreed?"

"Agreed," said Draco.

Blaise took a seat next to the sleeping man and across from Harry. He made sure to keep as far away as possible from the unknown individual.

Harry noticed for the first time that Blaise held a copy of the Daily Prophet in his hands. The headline, printed in thick, black letters, announced that Sirius Black had allegedly been sighted in the mountains near Hogsmeade. Harry felt his pulse quicken. He scratched his neck as the prickly feeling of perspiration squeezing through his pores assaulted it. His eyes narrowed and his stomach clenched as if in retaliation to the heat now within it.

Seeing Sirius Black's name in print sparked an immediate reaction from Harry. This physical manifestation of the essence of his parents' betrayer brought back the memory of the Malfoys' hushed conversation that Harry was never supposed to have heard.

Sirius Black was in Hogsmeade because he wanted to find a way to enter Hogwarts. Harry knew this right away. It seemed implicit in the context of the rest of his knowledge about Black's motivation. Lucius had said that Sirius was a friend of the Potters'. This was partly true; in reality, Sirius was a servant of Lord Voldemort—a Death Eater. Lucius had said that Sirius gave the Dark Lord the location of the hiding place of James and Lily Potter. That betrayal had led Voldemort to Godric's Hollow and had directly resulted in the death of Harry's parents. Harry hated him.

Sirius Black shared as much of the blame for the death of Harry's parents as Voldemort did—in Harry's mind, at least. Lucius had come to the conclusion that Sirius wanted to finish the job. He had escaped from Azkaban and, at the moment, his primary objective was to kill Harry and wipe the last Potter out of existence. That would be why Sirius was spotted lurking in the mountains of Hogsmeade (providing the witness had actually seen him there).

"Potter," said Draco.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"Merlin, Potter!" said Blaise. "You've been staring at the bloody paper for ages. Draco asked you if you wanted to read it."

"Oh," said Harry stupidly. He hadn't realized he'd been staring. "No, I don't."

Draco fixed him with a look that told Harry something about his tone had been off. Draco wanted answers. Harry wasn't going to divulge. He tried to look passive and indifferent.

The sun was setting outside the express and the sky was growing dark. A tangible feeling of anxiousness and anticipation seemed to engulf the Express. The students understood that they would soon be arriving at school. A new year was about to begin. It was a fresh start for everyone. It felt comforting and perhaps a bit exhilarating. Eventually it would feel like a chore. Everyone knew this in the back

of their minds, but no one consciously acknowledged—especially not Harry.

He, Draco, and Blaise all pulled their robes from their trunks and were dressed and ready in a matter of two minutes.

"Where are we?" said Blaise. "I can't see outside."

He pressed his face to the window and made blinders with his hands on either side of his face to reduce the amount of light hitting the window.

"I think I see the mountains," Blaise announced. "We're nearly at Hogsmeade."

And then the lights went out. The black, semi-reflective box that Blaise had been staring through suddenly grew lighter and bluer in hue. The mountains were revealed to Harry and Draco as the piercing sound of the brakes on the train cut through the air like sirens, alerting them to the impending arrival of some unknown danger.

Harry and Draco both stood up and Blaise turned around. This was highly unusual. They could hear the muffled and confused cries of other students through the walls of their compartment. Harry drew his wand without conscious thought. Blaise and Draco followed suit.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Draco demanded. "Has Dumbledore lost it? Is he so senile that he can't even control the bloody Express anymore?"

"I don't think Dumbledore has anything to do with this," said Harry who was busy entertaining the notions of various incarnations of danger that were flittingly materializing in his mind. The name Sirius Black was the loudest and most lucid incarnation. Harry could see Black, clad in tattered prison garb, skulking through the corridors of the train, silently murdering anyone that got in his way. He would have already dispatched any adult that could threaten his mission. He would have left the children alive and afraid—they were no threat to him. He would find his way to the last compartment of the last car where Harry was standing. He would open the door and Harry would either die, or Sirius Black would be made to pay for what he'd done.

Harry was startled by what sounded like cracking glass. He wheeled around to see that the window of the Hogwarts Express was quickly freezing over. The ice extended across the plain of glass like the crooked, jagged claws of some formidable, devilish beast. They obstructed the views of the dark mountains and eliminated Sirius Black from Harry's mind in the same instant.

Harry felt a chill creeping into the compartment and noticed his quick, short breaths being expelled from his nose in white puffs.

The ice was now moving to cover the window of the compartment door. Harry seized the handle on impulse and pulled. It wouldn't give. The door was frozen shut. Harry fleetingly thought that they would die of the cold in this compartment, all three of them as well as the sleeping man in the cloak that looked to be dead already anyway.

Harry suddenly felt helpless—all hope evaporated from his body like water vapor and went to feed the encroaching ice. Harry had faced death before, but never had he been gripped by such a stupefying feeling of hopeless depression. He left like falling to the ground and closing his eyes. He would wait for death to devour him. There seemed to be no happiness left within the world—not even a possibility.

The compartment was unnaturally silent. Harry's sight seemed to take on the quality of a surreal painting with a vignette. Everything seemed to slow. He felt lifeless and apathetic. This was the end.

A loud crack assaulted his ears and sent his heart racing. He instantly backed away from the door of the compartment until his back hit the frozen window. He extended his wand automatically, aiming it at the door.

The door flew open. Harry found himself facing a floating figure. The entity brought a freezing chill so biting that Harry thought it would surely kill him at any moment. All light seemed to be sucked into the center of the dark figure, as though it was some kind of black hole. Harry's knees buckled and he fell to the ground, covering his ears as a terrible scream of unfathomable anguish assaulted him.

The scream possessed some unique quality of meaning. It translated in Harry's brain automatically, as though it wasn't merely

a scream, but a cry in some foreign language that Harry vaguely understood. It sounded like his name.

There was a flash of silver light. Harry had been expecting a flash of green. Nevertheless, the flash of silver brought what Harry knew was coming—blackness.

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